

Chapter 1 – Falling Apart

Harry Potter, it could be said, had never had an easy life. His parents had been murdered when he was but an infant, he had been forced to live with his abusive aunt, uncle, and cousin, and he had nearly been killed during his previous year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He had numerous scars, both physically and mentally, but none stood out like the one on his forehead. That scar was special. That one was created when the dark wizard, Voldemort, had tried killing him after taking down his parents. The spell had rebounded and left the Dark Lord without a body.

This did not stop him from trying to take his revenge, however.

In an attempt to save the Philosopher's Stone at school, Harry had quite literally come face to face with the Dark Lord. Though he had no body, it didn't stop him from trying to kill Harry. What was left of the man had seemed to possess Quirinus Quirrell, his Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. In the end, Harry had managed to hold off the two-faced man until Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts, arrived.

During the fight, Harry had been shoved to the ground. He had landed on the side he was hiding the Stone in, causing a small shard to break off. Harry wasn't sure what he would do with this, but kept it, just in case.

Harry's return to Number Four, Privet Drive, had not been his choice. Towards the end of the previous school year, Dumbledore had explained that there was strong blood magic protecting Harry's relatives' house. He had to stay at Number Four for a minimum of three weeks for the magic to remain active during the time he was at school. It was also the reason that Harry couldn't stay with his best friend, Nymphadora Tonks.

When he arrived back at the house where he had suffered so much in the past, Harry had been afraid to even knock. He stood outside, in the dark, for what felt like hours before the front door opened and his cousin, Dudley, stepped out. Dudley had been carrying a trash bag that looked rather full. The two stopped when they caught sight of one another, neither moving or saying a word.

Dudley had been the first to recover, however. He dropped the trash bag on the ground, scattering its contents, and screamed for his father. Vernon Dursley, just a bit larger than his son, had come waddling in from the living room. One look at Harry and the man had become furious, yanking the boy and his trunk inside the house faster than Harry had thought possible. Things had only dissolved from there. Vernon had screamed at Harry, shoved him about the first floor, and demanded to know where he had been for the better part of the year. He yelled that his poor wife had to start cooking again and that it was all Harry's fault. This had earned Harry almost a week of no food for himself.

Harry had tried explaining, but it didn't sink in until he had pulled his wand out. Petunia, who had walked in at the sound of her husband yelling, shrieked when she saw the wooden instrument. A fearful look in her eyes, the woman had started babbling incoherently about her sister, some school for freaks, and how she had gotten herself killed for it all.

The cupboard door had been yanked open and Vernon was about to shove Harry in when Petunia had shrieked again. Looking fearfully at Harry, she sputtered that it might be a good idea for Harry to take Dudley's second room - a place where the pudgy boy stored all of his broken and unwanted toys. Vernon had demanded to know why and Petunia leaned in to whisper something to the man. Harry hadn't been sure of what they had said to one another, but whatever it was seemed to spook his uncle.

Vernon had lost a lot of gusto after that. He demanded Harry go up to the second floor and clean all of Dudley's things out of the room. Harry did as he was told, though it took well over an hour to do so. After he was finished, Vernon shoved the boy's trunk into the room and proceeded to lock him in. Harry had been thankful that he had left his owl, Hedwig, with Tonks and her mother. His uncle would have probably killed the creature on sight.

All that had happened almost two and a half weeks prior. Harry was let out of his room two times a day, mostly to use the bathroom. Once his food 'privilege' had been restored, he got old leftovers once a day. He was constantly hungry and barely got any sleep worth speaking of.

After the first week, he had fallen into depression. Tonks' mother, Andromeda, had promised that she would do something if he could only get through his first night back.

He hadn't seen Tonks, nor her mother, since the night he left to return to Number Four. No visits, no owls, no explanations. There was nothing and Harry couldn't understand why. Eventually, he began to wonder if Tonks really thought of Harry as her friend. He began wondering if she only liked being around him in public because of his fame. A small part of his brain always tried reasoning with these thoughts, but in the end lost out to the depression that had swept over the boy.

It was only a few nights until Harry turned 12, though at the moment, he couldn't think of any reason to celebrate, even if he was allowed to.

"Now you listen to me, boy. I have a very important guest coming over tonight! I don't want you to make a peep, do you understand me?" Said Vernon Dursley in a dangerously low voice.

Two more days had passed and Harry's birthday was right around the corner. During his first trip out of his room, Harry had been yanked aside by his uncle. Apparently, Vernon Dursley was going to be having something of a business dinner that night. Something about a possibly large order of drills. Harry tried not to pay much attention to his uncle's life.

Nonetheless, trying to argue with someone at least twenty times larger than himself seemed rather pointless. His most recent injuries still hadn't healed all the way and he wasn't in the mood to get more. With a quiet sigh, he nodded and murmured, "Yes, Uncle Vernon."

"You're to stay in your room and not move about." Vernon continued, pacing back and forth in front of Harry. "I don't want to hear *any* noises from upstairs! They're going to be here from five until around ten. So don't you move!"

"Yes, Uncle Vernon."

"And don't you try any of your *tricks*, boy. I'm warning you now... if you try any funny business, I'll make sure you're not *fit* to leave this house again." Vernon said, voice dark.

"Y-Yes, Uncle Vernon." Harry said, internally wincing as his stutter returned. Over the past year, it had all but vanished, only returning when Harry was upset or scared. But now, trapped back in Number Four, it had come back almost to full force. Locked up and away from anyone he thought he had as a friend, it was all Harry could do to just keep himself going.

"Now get back in there, boy! If there's any dinner leftover, Petunia will bring it up to you!" Vernon roared, grabbing Harry by the arms, spinning him around, and shoving him at the staircase. Harry stumbled, not predicting the sudden movement, and fell forward against the stairs. He knew better than to groan or otherwise show a sign of being hurt. That would only make his uncle angry.

Rubbing his ribs as he walked back upstairs, Harry didn't notice Vernon walking off into another room. Nor did he see his cousin waiting for him at the top of the stairs. Only when he was once again grabbed and shoved did Harry realize he had practically walked into his mammoth of a cousin.

Dudley chuckled. "I dunno what mum and dad are so scared about. You don't look any different now."

Harry, who had also learned not to bother talking to his cousin at all, kept silent.

Dudley smirked. "Awww, is ickle Harry upset? Gonna go cry to your mummy now? Oh, that's right...she's dead, isn't she? And your little girlfriend hasn't been by, either, has she? Guess nobody wants you around, huh?"

"Shut up, Dudley." Harry growled, unable to stop himself.

"What did you say?" Dudley hissed, narrowing his eyes.

"I told you to shut up, you great lump!" Harry spat, glaring at his cousin. "Shut up or I'll curse your bloody face off!"

Dudley backpedaled slightly, but balled his hands up into fists. "Y-you can't! You don't have your... your...."

"Wand?" Harry offered.

"Don't say it!" Dudley yelled. "If I told dad what you said, you'd be in for worse than what you got when you came back!"

"I'll say whatever I feel like. It doesn't matter, since I'm going to be pushed around, anyway." Harry said, voice low. "Wand, wand, dirty great WAND!"

"DAD! HE'S TALKING ABOUT THAT *THING* OF HIS AGAIN!"
Dudley cried out. **"MAKE HIM STOOOOOP!"**

His cousin then proceeded to smile viciously at him. Harry glared, then turned and bolted towards his new bedroom, hearing his uncle's stomping footsteps coming from down below. It didn't stop the larger man when he reached the door, however. Practically knocking it from its hinges when he threw it open, Vernon stormed across the room and grabbed Harry by the throat, fury in his eyes.

"I told you not to talk about what you are in my house!" He said in a low hiss. "I warned you far too many times! I think you need to be reminded of what *happens* when you disobey me, boy!"

Harry wasn't sure what time it was when he came to. It was dark outside, so it was after sunset. What day it was, however, was anyone's guess. His uncle had knocked him out for over 24 hours in the past, so it wasn't much to assume he might have done so again. Harry was on the floor and seemed to ache all over. He tried sitting up, but this only caused his chest to cry out in pain.

Coughing, Harry laid his head back down on the hard, wooden floor and groaned quietly. He would have to take tally on his injuries sooner or later. And past experiences had taught him that sooner was always better than later. He raised his arms, seeing that one seemed to have a few new cuts on it. The blood had long-since dried, however. His left leg felt rather awkward when he applied a bit of pressure to it. 'Another sprain, probably...' Harry thought, grimly.

He knew at least one of his ribs was cracked, judging from the sheer amount of pain coming from that area, so he tried to move as little as possible. Harry turned his head and pressed his ear against the floor, trying to hear any movement from downstairs. He could hear faint voices, mixed with the occasional forced laugh, but he wasn't sure who it was coming from.

Moving his head back to stare at the ceiling, Harry felt another wave of helplessness pass over him. If only the Wizarding World could see their so-called hero now - laying, nearly broken, on the floor of an all-but-empty room in his aunt and uncle's house. Some hero he was. Sure, he saved the Philosopher's Stone a few months ago... but only due to sheer luck.

As they so often did when Harry was left to his own devices, his thoughts turned to Tonks. She had seemed to be so caring towards him at the end of the school year. She had even given him a tighter than normal hug. But where was she now? Sitting in her nice, warm home and enjoying some sweets? Talking with her mother, who seemed to have forgotten that Harry even existed? Why hadn't they tried to get him out yet?!

Years ago, above all else, Harry had learned something very important. To keep himself from being severely harmed and to keep from being picked on more than normal, Harry had learned never to cry. Not even when his cousin had 'accidentally' broken his arm when they were both eight. Not when his uncle nearly blinded him by slinging him headfirst at the corner of the kitchen table. Not when one of his Aunt Marge's psychotic dogs had chomped down on his foot when he was nine. Harry couldn't even recall the last time he cried. But laying on the floor of his room, it seemed harder than normal to keep the tears away.

For another hour or two, Harry lay there, as motionless as possible, trying to keep himself from falling over the edge. Only when an odd sound emanated from the direction of the empty dresser did he move to look. Slowly, the door to the dresser opened up and an odd creature stepped out, looking quite nervous. Harry recognized what it was at once - it was a house elf, if the head and ratty pillowcase the thing wore as clothes were any indication. Harry had read about

house elves in a book he had checked out from the Hogwarts library at some point.

"W-who are you?" Harry whispered.

The house elf jumped, squeaking in a high-pitched voice as he spun around to stare at Harry. The house elf blinked and, for the briefest of moments, almost looked stunned. Slowly, the creature walked over to Harry, its large eyes darting around the room, as if it were expecting something to jump out and grab it.

"Y-you is Harry Potter, sir?" Asked the house elf slowly.

Judging from the voice, Harry assumed the creature to be male. Harry smiled weakly and offered as much of a nod as his aching neck would allow him. "Yeah."

"Why is Harry Potter on the ground? Harry Potter has a nice, big bed nearby..." The house elf said, sounding confused. He kept twisting his pillowcase in his hands.

"My uncle." Harry murmured. "Hurt too much to move."

The house elf blinked. "Harry Potter is injured?"

"Quite a bit."

For a moment, the house elf looked rather angry. But the emotion faded quickly. "Dobby can make Harry Potter better, if Harry Potter is letting Dobby..."

"Is that your name, then?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yes, sir. Dobby is named Dobby, sir." Said Dobby the house elf.

"Well... it's nice to meet you, then, Dobby." Said Harry, smiling weakly.

"Harry Potter is saying it's nice to meet Dobby?" Asked the house elf, his voice once more high-pitched. "Harry Potter is such a kind wizard... not like Dobby's master..."

Suddenly, Dobby's eyes grew wider than normal. The house elf leapt over Harry to stand, facing the wall by the window, and began banging his head against it, crying out, "Bad Dobby! Bad, bad, bad! Mustn't say bad things about your master!"

"Dobby! Please! Be quiet...!" Harry pleaded, a faint whimper in his voice. "If my uncle hears you, I'll be in even worse shape than I am now..."

Dobby bit his lip and turned to face Harry once more, a large bruise forming on his bald head. "Dobby is sorry, sir... but house elves is not to talk badly about their masters... That Dobby is even here is enough to be punished badly. Dobby knows what it is like to be in pain, sir."

"Didn't... Didn't you say something about being able to help me?" Harry asked, trying to derail the current direction of the conversation.

"Oh, yes, sir!" Dobby said, excitedly, bouncing over to Harry's side and beaming down at him. The house elf seemed to look Harry's body over slowly. "Harry Potter is badly hurt... Harry Potter's uncle did this?"

"Yes..." Harry said, looking off. "Not the first time, either. I'd like to say I'm used to it, but..."

"Harry Potter should not be hurt by his family!" Dobby squeaked loudly. "Harry Potter is a great wizard!"

"Dobby, shh! You don't know my uncle, he's... he's awful when he's mad!" Harry said, looking over at the door.

Dobby wiggled his long, bony fingers over Harry's body before touching the boy's ankle, chest, arm, and throat. Harry felt a faint tingling sensation in the spots that the house elf touched, but it passed quickly, leaving Harry feeling much better. He pulled in a slow breath, as deep as he could. When no pain met him, he grinned and sat up. "I feel fine!" He said. "Thanks, Dobby."

"Harry Potter is thanking Dobby!" Dobby said, clasping his hands together. "Master would never thank Dobby. Master-- No! Bad Dobby!"

Dobby made a grab for a nearby lamp, but Harry shot up and grabbed the creature before he could get to it. "Dobby! It's alright... um, listen... not to sound ungrateful, but why are you here?"

Harry sat down on the bed, setting Dobby down next to him. Dobby let out a sigh and looked off toward the window. "Harry Potter... Harry Potter must not return to Hogwarts!"

"...What? Why?"

"Bad things is going to be happening at Hogwarts. Harry Potter must not return!"

"...Dobby, all of my friends are there. It's more of a home than *this* place is. I *have* to go back!" Harry said.

"Friends?" Dobby said, looking back at Harry. "Friends who is not even writing Harry Potter? Friends who is not even visiting Harry Potter?"

"...How do you know that?" Asked Harry, an alarm suddenly sounding in the back of his mind. Quickly thinking back to what he read, Harry recalled that house elves had their own special kind of magic. It could be quite powerful, as well.

"...Dobby cannot be saying, Harry Potter, sir." Dobby said, looking down. "But Harry Potter must not return!"

"Dobby, whatever it is, I can handle it... It can't be worse than living here. Or surviving Fluffy and Quirrell..." Harry said.

"...If Harry Potter is not agreeing, Dobby will make sure Harry Potter CANNOT return!" Said Dobby, hopping off the bed and running for the door. With the snap of his fingers, the locks on the door popped open. Giving one look back at Harry, Dobby practically begged, "Harry Potter must say he is not going back..."

"I can't do that, Dobby." Said Harry, slowly, standing up. "...What are you doing?"

Looking miserable, Dobby replied, "What Dobby is having to."

With that, the house elf threw the door open and rushed out. Choking on a breath, Harry rushed out after him. By the time Harry reached the staircase, Dobby was already at the bottom. He was floating a rather sizable cake over his head. From his position, Harry couldn't see the Dursleys or their guests, but they seemed to be talking in the living room. How Dobby had managed to get past the bottom of the stairs and the kitchen without being seen baffled Harry...but he didn't have any time to worry about that now.

Dobby mouthed, 'Promise not to go back...' at Harry.

Harry shook his head slowly, staring at the floating cake. Dobby's ears drooped as he saw this and looked at Harry sadly for a moment before he began hovering the cake into the living room. Everything that happened afterwards seemed to move as if in slow motion.

The cake fell on the female guest, who sat directly beside her husband on one of the couches. The icing splattered all over his suit, as well. Harry wasn't exactly knowledgeable in how much muggle clothes cost, but judging from how the suit looked, it must have been expensive. Harry's head quickly spun to glare at Dobby, who snapped his fingers quickly and vanished into thin air.

"I'm so sorry!" Vernon was apologizing. "He's mentally disturbed! We were hoping to keep him out of your hair for the evening! He thinks being rude and obnoxious is funny, you see... we've had to take care of him for *years*..."

Harry barely saw the look his uncle flashed to him, but he knew that if he wanted to survive the night, he had best escape - and quickly.

Harry rushed back to his room and grabbed his trunk. He silently thanked Andromeda Tonks for charming wheels onto one end of it as he did. Spinning around, Harry wheeled the trunk out into the upstairs hallway and towards the staircase. The Dursleys' guests were standing and the man was yelling at Vernon that he would be paying for his cleaning bills. Harry was almost to the door when Vernon grabbed the back of his shirt.

"Why hasn't he written...? Do you think he hates us now?"

"Albus is coming to inspect the wards again tomorrow, Nymmy. He thinks someone must have tampered with them... it's the only thing I can think of, as well..."

"Yeah... That time we both went over there, I suddenly felt like I was hungry again, even though we had eaten before we left..."

"Exactly. Someone's been messing around with those wards... Only I don't know of anyone who'd know *how* to. The Ministry's having a bit of a fit, you know."

"Yeah, I'm sure they are." Tonks huffed, looking out the living room window. "Their golden boy is in danger, so they're doing absolutely nothing."

"Nymphadora!"

Tonks winced. "Well, it's true!" She argued, turning to face her mother. "They haven't done anything! And who knows what those awful muggles have been doing to Harry all this time!"

"Nymmy, breathe." Andromeda said, sighing as she walked over to her daughter. "I want to get Harry out of there just as much as you do... but standing around and complaining won't get anything done. You know that."

"Yeah..." Tonks said, leaning back against her mother, who embraced the worried girl comfortingly. "But it makes me feel better."

"I know, honey... I had such a good plan to get him out, too..."

"You never did tell me what you were gonna do, mum..."

Andromeda smiled slightly. "I was going to put my hair up like Minerva McGonagall's, transfigure my clothes into a classy business suit, and go over there, pretending to be from Bluewood Academy..."

"Bluewood Academy?"

"Mm. It's where new Aurors go for their training and first missions... Kind of like a muggle college, I suppose. Anyway, I was going to go rummaging around their home until I unearthed Harry."

"And then what?"

"Then I'd hex Vernon Dursley into a pig or something, I dunno." Said Andromeda, airily. "I didn't think things out that far."

Tonks rolled her eyes. "Great strategy, mum."

Andromeda shrugged.

Tonks sighed and pushed away from her mother, going to look out the window again. "I can't even imagine what he must think of us, not coming for him after we said we would... I just wi-- ...oh, god. Mum! It's Harry!"

"What?"

About that time, the doorbell rang. The two Tonks women looked at each other and rushed for the front door. Tonks threw it open and the two stood there, gaping at the sight before them. Harry was bleeding from somewhere above his hair line, the area around his left eye was swollen and puffed-up, his glasses were broke... he seemed to be putting all of his weight on his right leg, as well. His clothes - oversized, due to the fact that they were Dudley's hand-me-downs - were ripped in places, which only revealed more cuts, bruises, and bleeding spots.

Harry smiled weakly at his friend and her mother, offered a very quiet, "Hi," and fell over, unconscious.

Author's Notes: And so it begins! I would've had it out sooner, but I scrapped a previous attempt about two-thirds in. Then I bothered writing up a chapter guide.

I'll say now that this is going to be a bit darker than the first book. Mainly because Harry's going to basically think he's all-alone for most of the first half or so.

Leon will be showing up in chapter 2, for better or for worse. What the sam hell does THAT mean? Well, if I told you, it'd ruin the surprise, now wouldn't it? I WILL say, however, that Leon will be much more present in this book than he was in the last. Shame he and Harry will be at each others' throats for awhile... Mwahaha...

Chapter 2 should be out within a week. Getting started is always the hardest part for me. And I know exactly where I'm going to be going for the first ten or so chapters, providing I don't bugger off and veer away from what I had planned. It's happened before. Anyway, thanks to all the people who reviewed the previous book. I'm simply amazed at the amount of reviews I've received for it. Here's to another 20 chapters of the same.

Chapter 2 – Warmth

Harry woke up almost three days later. It was dark out, and he wasn't entirely sure where he was. He seemed to be okay, save for a pounding headache. When he moved, his muscles cried out, forcing him to let out a groan. "Right...post-beating, then..." He muttered to himself, knowing all too well that familiar sting.

No one seemed to be around and the house was quiet. After a few minutes of his vision adjusting to the lack of light, he remembered what had happened. He had been dragged off into another room by his uncle and beaten silly. He had then rushed upstairs, got his trunk, and hobbled off into the night. Which meant...

Harry sighed and, against his body's wishes, slipped out of bed. He was in a pair of black and green pajamas that Andromeda had made for him, he idly noted. He felt slightly dizzy, as well. An annoyance at most, but it was still troublesome. It meant that he had to keep one hand on something stable at all times - he wasn't very keen at falling flat on his face. Showing up and passing out was embarrassing enough, even though he knew neither Tonks nor her mother would say anything about it to anyone.

Stepping out of 'his' bedroom - the Tonks women insisted upon dubbing it that, since it had been his for the better part of the previous summer - he crept into the hall, one hand on the wall for support. He looked to the end of the hallway, where Andromeda had an old clock hanging. Squinting, he saw that it was well after midnight – almost 2AM, in fact. That was troublesome, as well. Not only did he want to talk to someone, he was starving!

Figuring that Andromeda wouldn't mind him sneaking a bit of food in the middle of the night, Harry slowly made his way downstairs. It felt good to be in a place he felt secure. Especially after how he had been smacked stupid by his whale of an uncle. '*One day,*' Harry thought as he rounded the bottom of the stairs and headed into the kitchen, '*One day they'll get exactly what they deserve... and I'm gonna be there, laughing...*'

Harry knew vaguely of where Andromeda hid all of the sweeter things that she got when she went shopping. Tonks said that her mother wasn't aware that she knew the hiding places, either. As long as a large amount wasn't swiped at once, it was safe to nick a bit. Harry started to head for a cupboard that he knew had a fake back to it – Andromeda stored lollipops there, amongst other things - but his stomach derailed his plans. It hadn't had any food in it for awhile, and it demanded a more proper meal.

Slightly annoyed at both his stomach and his sweet tooth, Harry made for the fridge to inspect its contents. He didn't *think* that cooking eggs and bacon would wake the two Tonks women up. In any case, he didn't really think they'd mind. Probably worried about him, those two.

Less than half an hour later, he had himself a decent little meal set out. Eating a whole lot wouldn't do him good - he had gone without food for just a bit too long to start wolfing down everything in sight. Pouring himself a tall glass of orange juice, (he was dreadfully parched) Harry walked over to the table and sat down. Ignoring his stomach's argument about needing as much food in it as Harry could take, he ate sensibly.

It was the best food Harry had tasted in a long time. Harry was used to not having a whole lot to eat, but it had been a long time since he was outright starved. When he was finished, he gathered the plate and everything else he had used, and took them over to the sink. As he was carefully setting them back down, he heard a faint patter behind him. Figuring he'd better hurry and get everything out of his hands in case Tonks happened to flying tackle him into a hug, Harry sped up a bit.

Just as he was setting his fork down, he felt Tonks lean up against his back, wobbling ever so slightly. Her head pressed up against his shoulder and, for a moment, neither moved. Finally, Tonks lifted her arms and sleepily wrapped them around Harry, murmuring, "Was worried."

Harry frowned. This certainly hadn't been the response he had been expecting out of his friend. When he made no move to say anything in reply, Tonks asked, "How?"

"My uncle." Harry replied, his own voice quiet. "But...I think it'd be better if I explained when everyone was up... I only came down because I was so hungry..."

"No! No sleep..." Tonks said, her grip around Harry tightening. "No sleep... too many nightmares..."

Harry's frown deepened. "Tonks...? Tonks, c'mon... let's go back upstairs. We can sit up and talk, if you want..."

"No sleep?"

"No sleep." Harry repeated, smiling slightly over his shoulder. It took a minute, but Tonks nodded against him and finally released him. She took a step back and rubbed at her eyes. Harry finally turned around and was left feeling a bit surprised. Tonks was wearing a pair of blue and black pajamas that seemed to be just a bit too big for her. The top kept slipping off of one shoulder or the other, forcing the girl to scowl and tug it back up. Her hair was long, curly, and very blue...and it seemed to be more than a little messy. Harry briefly had a mental image of Tonks standing on her head in her sleep. When Tonks looked up at him through still half-asleep eyes, he saw that they were as green as his own.

Harry bit down on his lower lip lightly so as not to say aloud just how utterly adorable his best friend looked. He smiled then, reaching out for one of her hands. "C'mon... there's some stuff I'm curious about, too..."

Harry had promptly brought Tonks back up to his room. On the way, she explained that the smell of food had brought her down. Harry got a chuckle out of that, remembering several mad dashes to the Great Hall during their first year at Hogwarts. Once upstairs, Harry adjusted the pillows on the bed so that the two of them could sit and lean back against the headboard.

Tonks settled herself in right beside Harry, causing him to blush slightly. It was a good thing that the house was still dark. Unsure of how to respond to such a gesture, Harry slipped a shaky arm around his friend's shoulders. This seemed to make Tonks considerably more comfortable, as she let out a sleepy purr of sorts and leaned her head over onto his shoulder.

"Um... so..." Harry began, his voice squeaking as he started to speak. "How come you guys... how come you didn't come and get me...?"

"We couldn't..." Tonks said, pouting. "Every time we tried, we kept feeling weird... like we forgot something back home an' stuff... we called up Dumbledore, eventually. Kept forgetting that the stupid house seemed to have wards all over it... but that was the night you showed up, so..."

"How long's it been?" Harry asked.

"Couple days...all you've done is slept. You haven't even changed positions or anything. You just...slept very, very still in the same position for days on end..." Tonks said, her voice far away. She seemed to lean into Harry a little more, bringing her knees up to her chest and wrapping an arm around them.

"The house repelled you, huh?" Harry said, his voice taking a dark tone. "I'm gonna kill that bloody elf...!"

"Elf?" Tonks asked.

Harry proceeded to inform his friend over what had transpired between him and Dobby the house elf. Both were feeling a bit more fired up when he was finished.

"That...that...!" Tonks sputtered. "You can't kill him, *I'm* gonna!"

"Ohhh no you don't!" Harry said, scowling at Tonks. "It's his fault I suffered, so--"

"Exactly! Which is why I'm gonna stuff his own giant head up his--"

"Nymphadora!" Came a sharp voice from the doorway that caused both Harry and Tonks to jump.

Looking over, they saw a half-asleep Andromeda leaning against the door frame, blinking sleep from her eyes. "Mind your mouth, young lady." She said, staving off a yawn that tried forcing its way out.

"Sorry, mum... how long've you been there, anyway?" Tonks said.

"Long enough. I'll relay all that to Albus, Harry, if that's alright with you?" Andromeda asked. When Harry nodded, she came into the room and sat on the edge of the bed. "You... had us worried. Nymmy's been in a right state."

"Muuuum!" Tonks whined. "Stoppit..."

"Now will you eat properly?" Andromeda asked, looking to her daughter now.

"She hasn't been eating normally?" Harry asked, also looking to Tonks.

Tonks blushed and lowered her head. "I spent most of my time in here with you..."

Harry blushed slightly, as well. "Oh... well... you should have eaten. I wasn't going to go anywhere."

Tonks turned and swatted Harry lightly on the arm before resuming her position of using his shoulder as a pillow. "Oh, be quiet... Mum brought my food up here an' ate with me... I just didn't have much of an appetite...that's all..."

"So a house elf was the cause of all the problems, huh?" Andromeda said, looking up at the ceiling in thought. "I really am sorry we didn't contact Albus sooner, Harry. But, as Nymmy said, we kept forgetting. Whatever that elf did, it must have been very strong magic."

"So it seems." Harry said, sighing. "Who fixed me up, anyway?"

"I did." Andromeda said, smiling. "I figured it couldn't hurt to brush up on my medical spells and the like. Just in case something like this ever happened."

"How did we all wind up talking on my bed in the middle of the night?" Harry asked, randomly. "It's all quite odd."

"S'your fault for wakin' me up." Tonks mumbled from beside him. From the sound of her voice, she was falling asleep.

"No, your stomach woke you up." Harry correct, grinning. Tonks made a feeble error to swat him, but her arm flopped down by her side.

"I think we should all get some sleep..." Andromeda said. This was, apparently, the wrong thing to say. Tonks' head shot up again, her eyes wide open, and she promptly latched herself to Harry, nearly causing him to tip over onto his side.

"No sleep!" Said the girl, staring at her mother, who blinked in surprise at her reaction.

"Why not?" Andromeda asked.

"Nightmares..." Tonks said. Harry felt her grip on him tighten for the second time that night. "A lot of 'em."

Andromeda hadn't missed this exchange and smiled quickly to Harry. "I still have some dreamless sleep potion somewhere... if you took that, you could sleep properly and not have to worry..."

But Tonks shook her head stubbornly. "Don't wanna..."

"Tonks..." Harry whispered. "I'm alright now... if you want, you can sleep in here. I'll probably stay up, reading, until dawn... or whenever we can floo Dumbledore without worrying about the time."

Tonks tilted her head to look up at him. He offered her a smile, which caused her to duck her head again. Finally, she looked to her mother and nodded slightly. Andromeda got to her feet and, without a word, headed off to find the potion in question.

"Sorry..." Harry said, once Andromeda was out of earshot.

"Sorry? For what?"

"Making you worry... and for your nightmares." Harry said.

Tonks frowned, squeezing him gently. "It's alright... like you said, you're fine now." She paused, then sat up a bit better and kissed him quickly on the cheek. "Just don't ever do it again."

This, of course, left Harry in a state of shock that was only knocked away when Andromeda returned with a tiny bottle filled with just a bit of liquid. Tonks detached herself from Harry and took it from her mother, uncorking the top and downing the contents. Within moments, she was slipping down next to Harry, murmuring something incoherently.

Andromeda helped scoot her daughter to the side of the bed that Harry wasn't occupying, getting her tucked in. Harry watched, though his eyes were more focused on Tonks than her mother. He felt a distinct lack of warmth now that she wasn't pressed up against his side and couldn't help but want it back.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Andromeda asked, snapping Harry away from his thoughts. He looked from Tonks to her mother, nodding.

"I'm fine...I was a bit dizzy when I went downstairs... hope you don't mind me cooking a bit..." Harry said.

"Not at all. Any time you're hungry, feel free." Andromeda said, smiling and leaning over to give the boy a light hug. "I told you, you're like family. What good is saying that if you can't act like it?"

Harry blushed and gave the woman an awkward hug in return, murmuring a thanks to her. He was still painfully new to the whole 'being close to people' thing, after all. A year hadn't taken away very many of his poorer faults...and the time spent locked away at Number Four had only reinforced them.

"Your things are where they were last time. If you need anything, I'll be in my room... or maybe downstairs, getting some coffee ready." Andromeda said, heading back for the door.

Harry nodded, picking a book up off of the nightstand. It was just one of his first-year textbooks, but he enjoyed reading through them time and again just the same. Andromeda smiled again and said, "We thought we should set some there, just in case you woke up... well, in the middle of the night or something."

Harry chuckled quietly and flipped on the lamp that was on the table. Looking over to ensure that it didn't bother his sleeping friend, he settled himself back and opened the book to page 186 - the spot he had left off on the final day at Hogwarts last term. Andromeda watched him lose himself in the text for awhile before quietly slipping out of the room.

"...like I'm a pawn... Nothing special, just for show... and always, I'm the first to go. Moved around without a thought, through..." Harry, it could be said, never had a good life. Though it might seem like a simple matter of abuse on the outside to some, it ran deeper than it looked. He had never had any comfort when he was injured or beaten. He only had the spiders in the cupboard to keep him company. And, though he rarely ever got a chance, sometimes one of his relatives would have a radio on somewhere in the house. More often than not, it was Dudley. Vernon didn't care for music - at least the kind that was typically played nowadays.

Petunia didn't care for music at all, on the other hand. Even the old stuff that Vernon listened to once in a blue moon - usually only when company was over. From all of this, however, Harry had grown rather fond of music in all its varieties. To help himself during the more vicious beatings he had suffered over the years, he had started to hum and sing quietly. Soft enough that his relatives didn't hear, but enough to keep him from being in a dark silence.

He didn't really know the full versions of anything. He only had bits and pieces of songs, along with the stuff he sometimes came up with on his own. And now, as dawn quickly approached, Harry had

absentmindedly started to sing under his breath as he read. The song had no real tune, aside from the one that Harry chose for it as he went. As such, it was currently a very soft piece - he didn't want to wake Tonks up.

"...A shield and weapon for the King... to use at will for anything..." Harry continued, half-nibbling at his lower lip as his eyelids grew ever heavier. He tried keeping the sleepiness from coming - he *had* slept for a good portion of the week already, after all. But the strain on his eyes from reading for so long was finally taking its toll on him.

"Do you really think that way?" Came a quiet voice from beside him.

Looking over and down at Tonks, who had made no effort to move from her curled-up position next to him, Harry asked, "I'm sorry... did I wake you?"

"Nuh-uh...jus' can't sleep past a certain point when I'm at home. Mum should be making breakfast soon..." Tonks replied, her face half buried in her pillow.

"Oh..." Harry replied, dumbly. Figuring now was as good a time as any to take a break, he closed his textbook and leaned back against the headboard. Letting out a yawn, he murmured, "Sleep well?"

"Much better." Tonks said, nodding just slightly.

"That's good..."

"Didn't know you sang."

Harry blinked. "I... I was doing that aloud?"

"Uh-huh."

Harry groaned. This caused Tonks to let out a sleepy giggle, finally moving to sit up. After tugging the shoulder of her pajama top back up onto her shoulder, she rubbed at her eyes and asked, "How come this is the first I've heard you doin' that?"

"It's not exactly something I want people to hear." Harry replied, shrugging. "Besides, I have a horrible singing voice."

"You weren't that bad." Tonks said, flopping against his side as she had earlier in the night. "Dunno the song, though... what is it?"

"Um... Something I just made up, really. Not very good...and there's not much to it at the moment." Harry said, truthfully. He knew he could trust Tonks with a secret. But just in case... "Don't tell anyone, alright?"

"Kay." Tonks managed through a yawn. "Still wanna hear the whole thing sometime, though."

"If I ever finish it, I'll give you the lyrics." Harry said.

"Aww... don't get to hear you singing it?" Tonks asked, pouting slightly.

"No way... it's too embarrassing." Harry said, looking away. "And stop doing that!"

"What?" Tonks asked, grinning.

"You know very well 'what'!" Harry said, making a face. "Let's get up, want to? Go bug your mum to get some food going?"

Tonks' eyes lit up and, faster than Harry could follow, she was out of bed and tugging on one of his arms, trying to get him to do the same. "Works for me!" She said, grinning still. "Food! C'mon, Harry!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming! I'd be coming a lot faster if you'd stop trying to yank my arm out of its socket..." Harry said, nearly falling on his face as he was tugged off of the bed.

"Harry? Harry, what've you been doing up here all afternoon?" Tonks asked, walking into Harry's room a few days later. Harry was sitting up in bed and had a number of sheets of parchment laid out around him. He was holding a quill, sucking on the tip of it in what seemed to be annoyance, and had apparently been both drawing and writing on

a number of the sheets. There was even a small pile in the nearby waste bin.

"Working out how I'm going to get my revenge." Harry said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Revenge?" Tonks asked, pushing aside a piece of parchment and sitting next to her friend. She reached for a random bit and held it up. On it was a fairly basic flood plan of Number Four.

"On the Dursleys." Harry answered in the same tone. "If they – or Dumbledore - think that I'm going to keep going back there year after year, they'd better think again. Dumbledore's gonna have to hit me with as strong a stunner as he ever has made to get me to stay in that house for another *minute*."

"Well, count me in on that... but what kinda revenge are you thinkin' about, eh?" Tonks asked, tilting her head as she took in the sight of a calculating Harry's face. His eyebrows were close together and he looked quite frustrated from the angle she was looking at him from.

"I dunno. I don't really care." Harry said, the corners of his lips turning down. "So long as they suffer for a really, really long time."

"Harry..."

"No. I don't care what kind of blood magic is protecting that house. It didn't do a very bloody good job of keeping even a *house elf* out of it. I know those things have strong magics of their own, but the fact remains. Dumbledore told me I would be safe. 'From anyone who might do harm to me,' he said. I suppose Dobby got through because he didn't do anything to me, physically. He toyed with me and let my bloody relatives do the harming." Harry said, eyes narrowing as he spoke.

"And then he went on to tell me that he had written them! And they claimed not to cause me problems anymore. Hah!" Harry continued, his hands shaking slightly.

Tonks reached out and places one of hers over one of his. Harry's body temperature seemed to be raised quite considerably, as he was

practically burning up. "Harry? You alright? Calm down, mate... not gonna do ya any good to get in a foul mood here..."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment before taking in a deep breath and slowly releasing it. His shoulders slumped and he shook his head, staring down at the parchment in front of him. "Sorry... didn't mean to go off on you like that. But really... for someone as supposedly powerful as he is, can't he set up a guard or something for me? Or at least something to warn him when one of the Dursleys hurts me? If they keep this up, I have a bad feeling that I may end up cursing them before I'm of legal age...if I survive *that* long..."

"Don't talk like that." Tonks said, her voice quiet. "Not after how you turned up here..."

Harry winced. "Sorry... again. It's just... difficult. I *could* stop them if I used my wand... but then I'd wind up getting expelled. And then where would I be?"

"Right here with me?" Tonks suggested. "Not like I'd suddenly stop being your friend and turn you away if you hexed those stupid Muggles into a booby hatch... And look at it this way - you wouldn't have to worry about any adoring fans leftover!"

Harry chuckled, flopping backwards into a laying position, stretching out on top of the parchment and lazily twirling his quill. "That's always a good thing, I guess. But even so, I'm *not* going back to Number Four. Ever."

Tonks moved to lay next to him, on her side and with her head propped up in one hand. "And if Dumbledore says you have to?"

"He'll have a fight on his hands."

"That'll only draw attention, you know. 'Boy Who Lived Duels Dumbledore' would be on every wizarding newspaper in the whole of Europe."

Harry sighed, slipping his eyes shut. "Or maybe I'll just root myself in the Tower and not come down. Or just wander back here. I was able to this time, right? I'll go back with those... those idiot relatives of

mine and sneak out under my cloak the moment their backs are all turned!"

"That's the spirit!" Tonks said, patting Harry on the shoulder.

Smiling faintly, Harry murmured, "Hey, Tonks..."

"Hm?"

"Whatcha think Leon's upto?"

"No idea. Hey, do you think we should see if we could visit *him* next summer?" Tonks asked.

"Don't see why not." Harry replied. "...You know, he's never really told us much about himself OR his home life..."

"True... And maybe then we could work out what's wrong with him, eh?"

"That, too." Harry said, nodding. "It's bugged me and bugged me and *bugged* me... and I'm still no closer to working it out. You'd be surprised how many illnesses - wizarding or otherwise – include symptoms similar to Leon's... I've given up working out things that way..."

"They are pretty vague, aren't they?" Tonks said, looking thoughtful. "...Oh well. First time we see him, let's ask."

"Yeah. Hey, Tonks?"

"Yeah?"

"I've been practicing..."

"Practicing what? ... Oh, you mean your Metamorphmagus stuff?"

"Yup. Want to see?"

"Sure!"

Harry sat up, leaning back on his arms. Shutting his eyes, he let his hair go through a small cycle of colors. From black to red, from red to blonde, from blonde to silver, from silver to maroon, and then back to black once more. When he opened his eyes, they were a golden color, which promptly cycled through a number of colors, as well. Tonks watched, her grin spreading with each new color that came up. When Harry was finished, she practically tackled him backwards in a hug.

Laughing, Harry tried prying her off of him. "Hey! Stop that! Your mum would have a fit if she saw us!"

"Oh, she has fits constantly, anyway. Who'd notice a change?" Tonks asked, giggling into Harry's shoulder.

"Ahem."

Tonks' eyes snapped open and she froze. Under her, Harry promptly dissolved into giggles at the sight of one Andromeda Tonks. She was standing in the doorway, hands on her hips, with an eyebrow raised in their direction.

"Well," She said, rolling her eyes. "I was going to say that we'd be having some cake later... but I guess I'll just have to toss the whole batch of angel food cake out..."

"Angel food cake?!" Tonks squeaked, hopping off of Harry and zipping over to give her mother puppy dog eyes. "Where?! Don't throw it out!"

"You're making it?" Harry asked, sitting up.

"I was." Andromeda confirmed, smiling. "I know I can whip them up with magic if I needed to, but... well, my mum taught me to cook when I was a little girl and I always did like baking cakes the best..."

"Are you gonna teach *me* someday, mum?" Tonks asked.

"I'm not sure." Andromeda said, her voice quite dry. "I'm scared you'd make nothing *but* cake and wind up a blimp..."

"MUUUUUM!" Tonks whined, following her mother as she left the room.

As they went, Andromeda called back, "Dinner's going to be ready in about half an hour, Harry!"

"Alright!" Harry called back.

Once they were downstairs and in the kitchen, Harry turned his attention to the bits of parchment surrounding him. With a sigh, he gathered them up, crumpled them into one big ball, and lobbed it into the trash bin. Setting the quill down finally, he then stood and stretched. If there was going to be cake with dinner, he had better get washed up and head down early.

After all, he had stayed there the previous summer. And he knew very well of the speed in which Nymphadora Tonks could put away a cake if left to her own devices. Before meeting Tonks, Harry had never witnessed anyone downing a whole cake on their own before - not even Dudley. But then, Petunia often regulated the amount of cake that Dudley could have in any given sitting. Tonks had wound up alone in the kitchen with a fresh angel food cake. Harry had been forced to flog Andromeda at work and ask if she could come home to fix the severe stomachache that was plaguing the woman's daughter.

It had taken half an hour for Andromeda to get off of work – Harry personally thought that she dragged the time out a bit to teach Tonks a lesson - but the problem had been resolved. Tonks had then promised solemnly to never eat like that again. Harry knew she hadn't done anything like that since... but just the same, it was better to be safe than sorry.

And, at the moment, Harry desperately thought he could use a nice, warm slice of something tasty to get his mind off of plans of revenge.

Author's Notes: See, I didn't drop the project. Actually surprised I got THIS out as fast as I did. So anyway, here's the new chapter 2! It's not as angsty as the old one AND it features a plentiful amount of Honks fluff. That oughta help ease the pain of a semi-restart of book 2. I hope you guys don't mind, but I'm gonna hold off on reading

reviews until after I'm done, I think. That way I won't skew away from my plans again. I hate doing that, as I really love reading reviews, but I think things'll turn out for the better if I don't accidentally get a stray idea wandering in my brain.

I was told that maybe I should slow down chapter releases slightly to give myself more time to actually plan things better... and I really think that's a good idea. Over the past... what's it been? Half a year since I started TPS:R? It was in August, so... around thereof... Anyway, since I started, I've been really trying to crank out at least one chapter a week... and I suppose the wear and tear of that has really put a strain on me. With everything else that's been going on in life lately, I guess I was just feeling pressured to squeeze chapters out regularly, rather than taking the time to make a better final product.

I'll leave the notes here fairly short, but I do have one reviewer to reply to before I try and cut myself off from reading reviews... something I really doubt I have the will to do for very long, truth be told...

randllee: I happen to LIKE slash/shounen-ai, thank you. Harry/Draco and Sirius/Remus being the top favorites, of course. Some day I might try and rig up a good, believable H/D fic - I've seen WAY too many horrifyingly bad ones to mention, sadly... - but it won't be today, and it certainly won't be here. This will be a Harry/Tonks story all the way. Though don't be surprised if I have Angsty!Remus following the 'werewolves mate for life' way of thinking after Order Reassembled. Nothing wrong with that kinda fic... though I have to admit staying far away from student/teacher ships - I still can't see why Hermione and Snape are so fairly popular... but that's just me.

Not to say that the Slytherins won't spread rumors about seeing Harry snogging Leon in a broom closet somewhere, mind. Gotta have rumors flying about poor, poor Harry, now don't we?

Until next time - which hopefully won't be too far away - I thank all of you for sticking with this through all the crap I'm subjecting you to. I'll go ahead and change my profile again, since it's obvious that I just can't leave this project alone. I blame all of you guys for making me feel like I'm NOT a totally crap writer. So nyeh.

Chapter 3 – A Golden Outing

"Oh, for the hatred of gods both ancient and horrible. What're *you* doing here!"

"Good to see you, as well. Now shut up and get out of my way, Malfoy."

Harry crossed his arms, letting out an annoyed sigh. He, Tonks, and Andromeda had been in Diagon Alley for all of five minutes and already they had run into an annoyance. Draco Malfoy, with only one of his two goons trailing along behind him, had sauntered over and blocked their way to the bank.

While Harry idly wondered where Crabbe was, Goyle menacingly cracked his knuckles from off to the side of his 'leader.'

"Yeah, sod off, Malfoy." Tonks added, sticking out her tongue at the blonde.

From beside her, Andromeda lightly swatted her on the back of the head. Glaring at her mother, Tonks whined, "Muum! Stop that! I don't care if he *is* my cousin - he's an insufferable git!"

Malfoy smirked at Harry, not bothering to even acknowledge the presence of the Tonks women. "Lovely family you have there, Potty. Had to go begging for one to sponge off of, did you?"

"Malfoy, I've just had the worst Floo trip ever, I've had an awful headache since breakfast, and I have a feeling it's only going to get worse..." Harry said in a tired voice, glancing quickly at the *long* line coming out of Flourish and Blotts. "Because some golden dandy is having a book signing. I'm not going to sit around and let you try pushing me into a fight. In short: Sod off."

"Gilderoy Lockhart is not a 'golden dandy'..." Andromeda murmured under her breath.

Tonks leaned in close to Harry and, in a stage whisper, said, "Mum has a huge crush on him. I'm with you, though. Wouldn't mind seein' someone punch out one of those *perfect* teeth of his."

"Couldn't have put it better myself." Harry said, rubbing at his temples. "The press is there, too. I just have this sinking feeling I'm going to get pulled into a publicity stunt."

"Women's intuition?" Asked Tonks, dryly.

"Quiet, you." Said Harry, rolling his eyes. "Malfoy, are you and your one-ton army going to get out of the way, or does Tonks' mum have to exact punishment on her *favorite* nephew?"

Malfoy sneered, looking at Tonks first, then Andromeda. "So... you'd be the *Aunty Andy* that mother speaks so... *fondly* of, are you?"

"*Aunty Andy*?" Repeated both Harry and Tonks, looking over at Andromeda, who seemed to be twitching. The two friends exchanged a glance, then proceeded to dissolve into giggles.

Malfoy, who didn't seem to enjoy the knowledge that he brought humor to two people he hated, signaled to Goyle. Together, the two shoved their way past the laughing Ravenclaws, heading towards what appeared to be Knockturn Alley.

"If *either* of you call me 'Aunty Andy'... no sweets for a *month*." Said Andromeda, twitching still.

And, of course, this only made the two children laugh even harder.

"Who would have ever thought..." Tonks said as the three continued up the road, "That Malfoy would make us laugh?"

"Without the aid of Fred and George, you mean?" Harry replied, wiping the corners of his eyes.

"On that note, we should mail them - see how the revised version of The List is coming along!" Tonks said, brightening up suddenly.

"Ooh, good idea. Let's write them when we get back home!" Harry said, eyes twinkling in a way not unlike Dumbledore's.

As she watched Harry and Tonks go back and forth excitedly, Andromeda couldn't help but smile as Harry referred to her house as 'home.'

"I'm not going." Harry said, crossing his arms and puffing up. He didn't care if he sounded childish. He knew perfectly well that he did. But there was no way in hell that he was going to be going into a bookstore while Gilderoy Lockhart was in it. Especially not one packed to the gills. And this definitely qualified as 'packed'...

"Gotta get our schoolbooks, Harry." Tonks said, walking back over to him. "C'mon, it won't be bad. He'll probably never notice ya. Neither will the press. Just keep your head low."

"I'm not going." Harry repeated, twisting his face up even more.

"Get in the store!" Tonks said, walking around behind Harry and pushing.

"Hey, stop!" Harry said, nearly tumbling over onto his face. Try as he might, Tonks was right strong when she wanted to be. And, for whatever inane reason, she *really* wanted to be right now.

"No! C'mon, mum! Golden dandy at ten o'clock!" Tonks said, wheeling Harry in the right direction.

Harry let out a whining cry of protest, but to no avail. He was pushed into the bookstore against his wishes. Once inside, he found that it was even more packed than it looked from outside; an impressive feat, to be sure. Nonetheless, it felt claustrophobic to Harry. Any small, enclosed area did. And, despite the store being fairly spacious, the sheer number of people in it giving off body heat and various odors was already getting to Harry.

Andromeda must have sensed something wrong, as she quickly put a hand on Harry's shoulder. Tonks did the same with his other side. Both could feel how strangely tight his muscles were. When Tonks

peeked around in front of her friend, she could see his eyes darting around, as if he were expecting a sudden attack from somewhere.

But no attacks came. And, as they got closer to the front, Harry started to unwind. He was still nervous and not happy about having to deal with Gilderoy Lockhart up close and personal, however. They had been in the store for almost half an hour and Harry had listened to enough ridiculous waffling that he could have gagged. Dumbledore honestly expected this man to teach them *anything* useful? He seemed to be too self-serving and pompous to do anything aside from prattle on endlessly about himself!

"See? This isn't so bad." Tonks whispered.

And, no sooner than the final word had left her mouth, did Lockhart finally notice who was next in line. Harry could see the man's eyes light up in what only could be described as boyish glee...and he didn't like it one bit. Feeling a bit more claustrophobic and unable to escape, a panic began to rise in Harry's stomach.

"Harry Potter!" Lockhart said, getting to his feet and walking around the table he was at. "In the person! Well, now this *is* a lucky day for all of these people, isn't it?"

"Keep him away from me." Harry whispered quickly as his breath suddenly seized up.

"And why's that?" Tonks interjected loudly, though still sounding as polite as she could muster. "We're just here for our schoolbooks."

Lockhart looked at Tonks strangely for a moment before offering up a smarmy grin. "Oh, dear girl, of course you are, of course you are! And any friend of Harry Potter's will *naturally* get a complete set of my books, signed, for free!"

Tonks puffed up her cheeks. "I don't want your ru-"

"Tonks, get me out of here." Harry whispered quickly to his friend, his breath now coming in short bursts. He looked just shy of completely hyperventilating.

"What's wrong, Harry? A bit nervous about meeting someone as famous as I?" Lockhart asked, clasping his hands together and grinning jovially for the crowd. "I don't blame you, my boy, I don't blame you at all. If I were in your shoes, I'd be nervous, too! Don't be shy, though, it's quite alright. Now then, just step back over to the desk with me and I'll be more than happy to sign your 'textbooks' for the year."

"No."

"Hmm? What was that, Harry?" Lockhart asked, already having moved back around the desk and sitting down. "Come on, then! Step right up!"

"No..."

"We'll get your books, Harry. You go on outside and get a breath of fresh air, alright?" Tonks murmured, placing her hand on his arm briefly.

Nodding, Harry had just turned around when a commotion came from the direction of the exit. Harry, with Tonks hot on his heels, quickly made their way back through the crowd to see what was going on. Apparently, a fight had spontaneously broken out. Harry couldn't be positive, but the two men involved looked mighty familiar for some reason.

"Get him, dad!" Called someone from off to Harry's side. Looking over, one piece of the puzzle slid into place. Fred and George Weasley were off in a corner of the room, peering around a rather girthy witch in blue, pumping their fists in the air and cheering. Alright, so that made the balding redhead their father.

It was Andromeda, who had caught up to the two kids, that explained who the other man was. "The snooty-looking blonde would be Lucius Malfoy. My dear sister married him, see."

"Who should we cheer on?" Tonks asked.

"If we don't want to be on the end of our own prank list, I suggest we cheer on Mr. Weasley." Harry said, blinking as the balding man

suddenly waffled the blonde with a toilet seat. Harry wasn't quite sure where a toilet seat, of all things, would come from, and decided that it would be in his best interests if he never asked.

The scuffle ended when Draco Malfoy, along with his mother, came rushing up. Narcissa was quick to get her husband off of the ground. Draco, as per usual, was smirking. It seemed that the younger Malfoy only had a handful of expressions, none of which he seemed very capable of mastering.

Just as Lucius Malfoy was rubbing at his jaw, a short, round witch (who also happened to have red hair) came running up. Now this person Harry *did* know. As Mrs. Weasley helped *her* husband up, Fred and George made their way through the crowd to congratulate their father. Ron and Ginny, the twins' little sister who looked like she was gathering supplies for Hogwarts as well, came running in from the direction their mother had appeared from, both quite out of breath.

"Honestly, Arthur!" Mrs. Weasley was saying. "What came over you?"

Rubbing at his chest and wincing, Mr. Weasley murmured a "Nothing important, dear." to his wife, glaring daggers at Lucius Malfoy.

Smirking through a grimace, Lucius walked towards the collected Weasleys, his glance moving from Arthur to Ginny. "Another one? Are you trying to send your own family to the poor house, Arthur? ...No, don't say it. I've already seen that dwelling of yours. I do believe it already classifies..."

Smiling down at Ginny, who took a step back and into Ron, Lucius murmured silkily, "Hand-me-downs from your brothers, eh? Sometimes I pity the poor, you know... My family has never had to scrounge and beg for money. But then... Narcissa and I have no intention of making child after child. Draco is quite capable, you see. I'm afraid, my dear girl, that you'll never be able to live up to our caliber of life."

Lucius reached out and ruffled Ginny's hair, causing Arthur to almost lunge at the man. Only by his wife's grace did he manage to withhold from it. Lucius' gaze went from Ginny to the books she was toting. Reaching out and grabbing at one, he held it up to the sky and

inspected it. The book was ratty and tattered with a spine that seemed to almost have given out completely. Lucius looked at it as if it carried some form of foul odor. He flipped it open and looked through a few pages, one of which ripped easily, drifting to the ground.

Lucius watched it fall and, when it had hit the ground, he knelt to pick it up. Smirking like his son, (his wasn't much better) Lucius then handed the book and its page out to the youngest Weasley. "Take your book, girl. It's the best your father can give you."

Standing, Lucius then smiled coldly in Mr. Weasley's direction. "And I'll be seeing you at work soon, I suppose. Good day, Arthur."

With this, the trio of Malfoys turned and swept off up the alley.

Andromeda pushed past Harry and Tonks, walking swiftly out to the eldest Weasleys. "Molly, Arthur, are you two alright? I'm so sorry about that... what my sister saw in that arrogant, stuck-up son of a-

"Andromeda, there are children present!" Mrs. Weasley admonished.

"Sorry. But you know what I mean! I don't know how anyone could turn out like they did. And they had a son! I don't even want to think about the physics behind that." Andromeda said, shaking her head.

As the traffic both inside the bookstore and out returned to normal, Harry and Tonks were waved over by Andromeda. Mrs. Weasley's eyes lit up when she saw Harry. "Harry! How good to see you again! How have you been?"

"Um...b-better, thanks..." Harry said, not meeting Mrs. Weasley's eyes. The first - and only other - time that they had met, Mrs. Weasley and Ginny had come to Hogwarts to spirit Ron away for his suspension. He hadn't been in the best of shape at the time.

Mrs. Weasley then turned and looked to Tonks. "And how have you been, dear?"

"Better after the distraction." Said the girl, grinning aside to Harry, who blushed slightly and gave her a weak elbow to the arm.

Mrs. Weasley blinked, then turned to give the evil eye to her husband. "And you... are going to be explaining to your children just what on earth *started* this whole mess after supper tonight, Arthur Weasley."

Mr. Weasley winced, which Harry figured had nothing to do with the injuries he was sporting, and nodded to his wife.

"Right, well... we should be going. Getting late and all." Arthur Weasley said, smiling at his wife and children. "Andromeda, good to see you again. You'll have to drop by sometime for a meal with us."

"I'd love to." Andromeda said. "...Good hit with the toilet seat, by the way."

Fred and George grinned at this, Arthur lowered his head to hide a smile, and the two Weasley women exchanged a confused look. Ron was looking off somewhere else.

Waving their goodbyes, Harry asked, "What was that all about?" after the redheads were well out of earshot.

"Well... Molly and Arthur have never had a lot of income, really. They've had loads of children and, somehow, have always managed to scrap by on what they've saved. Can't imagine it was easy this year, what with how expensive Lockhart's books are..." Andromeda said, frowning slightly.

"Fred and George never really talked about it." Tonks said.

"Always seemed perfectly happy." Harry added.

Andromeda chuckled. "I can't remember a time when those two haven't been. Are they still pranking people? The things they did to their poor little brother Ron when he was a baby..."

Once they had gone back to get their books (Lockhart was now pouting that no one paid any attention to him) and other school supplies, Harry, Tonks, and Andromeda returned to Number Nine.

Their earlier encounter with the Weasleys got the two children to pondering their list, which they had given over to Fred and George before the end of their previous year at school. The twins had mentioned something about updating it and such, but neither Harry nor Tonks quite knew what they had in mind.

As a way to pass time, the two immediately rushed upstairs and wrote a letter to the twins, asking if they could be spoiled on at least a *few* of the changes the twins had made. Harry asked if Hedwig was up for a trip. Having done little that summer aside from being trapped in her cage, the snowy owl seemed more than happy to stretch her wings properly. Ever since coming to Number Nine, she was allowed out at nights and to leave her cage at any point during the day if she wished. It rather made up for the time at the Dursleys, which had seemed to have affected her almost as much as it had Harry.

Just around the time Harry and Tonks had finished eating that night, Hedwig flew back in through the kitchen window, landing on the edge of the table and holding out her leg. Harry quickly took the letter and Hedwig took off upstairs, presumably to rest awhile before heading out for her nightly hunt. Figuring that it might not be a good idea to let Tonks' mother know about their brainchild, Tonks dragged Harry up to her room before letting him open the letter.

Dear Harry and Tonks:

Wasn't dad something today? We've always said that a well-placed toilet seat would get a man out of most any situation. It's about time *someone* listened to us! We're all doing fine, though mum really let dad have it after we got home. Even ickle Ronniekins seems to be growing up a bit, if you can believe it. Ginny's eagerly looking forward to her first year at Hogwarts - we both pray she won't wind up in Slytherin- and has been bouncing off the walls. Sometimes literally. Best not to ask about that.

As to your query about our revision, it's making slow but steady progress. We don't want to spoil *all* of the surprises we've come up with, so we're only going to reveal the first...oh, twenty or so. Any

more than that and it ruins the fun! Included is our own personal commentary. I hope we get the approval of the originators!

001: Ton-Tongue Toffee Best not to ask about *this*, either. You'll see the hilarity the very first breakfast at Hogwarts! We're getting started early!

002: Golden Dandy Drops Inspired by a certain new Defense Professor we're getting!

003: Depressios Moping Malfoy? Depressed Draco?

004: Bottom-Out Biscuits Not for the squeamish. One 'dose' will keep you - or your victim - in the loo for a good, long while.

005: Quadruple Qustards He can't hit you when he can't tell which of you is real!

006: Streaking Screammers We'll explain when you're older...

007: Crying Crisps Because a Sobbing Slytherin is a funny Slytherin.

008: The Great and Horrible Dive-Bombing Owl Trick Best not to-oh, you know what we're trying to say. Rest assured, you two will approve whole-heartedly when you see it happen!

009: Two Heads, One Eye We've read too many horror stories from the Ministry. But you have to admit, Malfoy arguing with himself for once would be a nice change.

010: Atrophy Entropy Better watch out if you suddenly see Malfoy crawling at you in a menacing way. Never good to get your ankles bitten by an ankle-biter.

011: Chew-Chew Train Ever wonder what Malfoy would like with a *couple* of cabooses? A less dramatic version of 009.

012: Salamander Surprise We aren't sure if it'd be a funny thing or a really, really *bad* one if Malfoy were to suddenly start spraying fire every time he opens his gob.

013: Love Me Knots In another mouth-related prank, how about Malfoy's hair going into the shape of a large, pink heart. In addition, his tongue will literally get tied in a knot. Completely harmless, if more than a little frustrating in execution. You don't want to hear the horror stories we had while trying to perfect *this* one...

014: Pasty Panties Right, you don't get to see this one until you two are older, either. Harry, stop blushing, mate! We promise we won't use it on any non-Slytherins!

015: Geriatric Gum Picture, if you will, Malfoy when he grows to be the ripe old age of 250. Now picture his shifting to that form and back again in the span of two days. This one's got a slow timer of sorts on it, but it's so worth it. Mum almost took Percy to St. Mungo's when we tested it on him. We were reamed for a good three hours after we explained what we were upto. But it's definitely worth the torment!

016: Smoldering Butt Okay, so we just wanted to use that phrase somewhere and figured we'd just make something up on the spot about smoke coming from the arse of an arse.

017: Lying Liquid You know truth potions, right? This is the opposite. It's mild, but it makes everything the person says to you the opposite of what it would normally be. The effects last for around 10 minutes. We may eventually make a longer-lasting version, depending on how well this one does.

018: Whirling Wigs Inspired by our own beloved Nymmy, (don't hurt us!) we decided to think up a way for a person's hair to cycle through a couple dozen colors on its own. After making all of Ron's hair fall out (He looked like a shorter version of dad!) and after making Percy's long, puce, and curly, we *finally* perfected it.

019: Curds and Weigh Do you two have *any* idea how disgusting curds and whey smell like? Anyway, anyone stupid enough to eat *this* stuff will gain 300 pounds for a few hours. Waddling Malfoy!

And finally, 020: Toppling Toast Please imagine this: Draco Malfoy and the rest of Slytherin house acting completely pissed. They won't be able to stand straight, walk straight, or even think straight. We wonder how many will run into one another head first...

So there you two have it. A sneak peek of the first revision. We've no doubt that we'll end up doing a few more before we leave Hogwarts, but this is good enough for now. We've got about 30 more finished, so don't think our reserves are dry just yet.

We need to get back to preparing, though. There are a few *special* ingredients we've harvested and picked up in various spots that we really need to take with us. Mum would pitch a wobbly if she found them, on top of that. See you on the train!

- Fred and George

"...So, Necromancers really exist, huh? Interesting."

"Yeah, but it's icky stuff, really. I mean, I've seen some books on 'em that mum's left out before. You really don't wanna see the kind of pictures in those."

"I made a guy practically melt a few months ago."

"...Point."

Harry sighed, leaning back in bed and rubbing his eyes. "Still... I wonder how much there is to learn. Even studying like I do and reading whenever I can, I probably would need my whole lifetime to learn everything important."

"Good thing we have longer lifespans than muggles, then, huh?" Tonks asked, sitting the opposite direction on the bed and leaning back on her arms.

"Yeah. Heh...I wonder what we'll look like when we're as old as Dumbledore is. Can you imagine me with a long, white beard?" Harry said, smiling crookedly.

"Anything else you're curious about?" Tonks asked.

"Actually, yeah. Do those cupid things exist?"

"Mum says they do... I think it's a load o' rubbish."

"Oh? Why's that?"

Tonks blushed slightly and looked off. "It's stupid, really..."

"If you can't tell me, who can you tell?" Harry said.

"... Well... Alright. But if you laugh, I'll clock you in the head with my foot. I just think that a person has the ability to fall in love with whoever they want. Dumb to think that *everyone* who falls in love got shot with some invisible arrow, isn't it?" Tonks said, still looking away.

Harry tilted his head back, gazing thoughtfully at the ceiling for awhile before replying, "Oh, I don't know... I'd like to think that there's *someone* out there who'd like me for who I am... instead of for *this*." Harry motioned at his scar.

"You'll find someone..." Tonks said quietly.

"If you say so." Harry replied, sounding rather put-out.

"I do. And don't you go getting mopey on me, either, Harry Potter." Tonks said, sharply, glaring Harry's way. "You're gonna grow old and get married and have 3 kids - two girls and a boy."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Two girls and a boy?"

"Two girls and a boy." Tonks confirmed, nodding solemnly.

"You're scary sometimes. You know that, right?" Harry asked.

"Of course I do."

"Just making sure... Hey, Tonks?"

"Hmm?"

"What am I going to do next summer?"

Silence filled the air as Tonks tilted her head. "Well..." She began, flopping back completely and crossing her arms. "I suppose I could try coming with you on the day you get back - see if I can spend the night. Bring mum along to help *convince* them..."

"I... don't think that's a good idea, Tonks." Harry said slowly.

"Why not?"

"Dudley's getting even bigger. I don't know understand the physics of it, but it's happening nonetheless. He's also getting stronger..." Harry said, darkness in his voice. His eyes clouded over for a few moments before he continued. "And he's been going around, beating up other kids in the neighborhood. His gang's getting bigger, too, so he'll corner kids and outnumber them."

"He'd be a one-man gang on his own if he's as big as you say." Tonks replied.

"Yeah, but he's slowing down. His shins would probably splinter if he tried sprinting."

"Now there's a promising thought." Tonks said. "So how'd you figure all o' this out?"

"Are you kidding? He brags with his friends when they come over. I pieced most of it together, but..." Harry shrugged. "Someday he'll get what's coming to him, Tonks. Someday it'll happen and I won't be there to help him out. I'll sit and watch, if I can. As long as he hurts for causing that much pain..."

Frowning, Tonks sat up and turned around, scooting up to sit beside Harry properly. Slipping an arm around his shoulders, she hugged him and muttered, "Don't you go getting all angsty around me. I'll stuff you full o' cake so fast, you'll choke."

"And this will help me...how?" Harry asked.

"You'll be too busy choking to care about anything else." Tonks said, winking. "And then you'll probably be too busy trying to chase me down!"

"Such cunning strategy." Harry stated in the blandest voice he could muster. "And why would I need to chase you? I believe, Nymmy, I have you trapped right now. Perhaps I could exact future revenge on you while you're still next to me?"

Tonks paused, squeaked as Harry's words set in, then moved her arm and quickly attempted to scatter off the bed. Unfortunately, she was facing off against a Seeker with rather good reflexes and, in one swift motion, Harry had tugged her back onto the bed.

As Andromeda returned home that evening, the sounds of her daughter, laughing like a madwoman, filled the house, along with the occasional shriek of "**STOP TICKLING MEEEEEE!**"

Rolling her eyes, the older Tonks woman just smiled and walked into the kitchen to prepare dinner.

Author's Notes: I hate the flu. Cripes. Laid up for well over a week. If I hadn't, I wouldn't gotten this out sooner. Sorry 'bout that, you lot. I don't wanna get into the habit of updating once every month or something. That's too long, even for a slacker like ME.

So here we have a trip to Diagon Alley gone horribly wrong. And, hopefully, a bit more believable than the scrapped version. Note that I still had the toilet seat return for a smash to the head. And I hope everyone likes the first of what might be many List revisions! It was actually rather annoying trying to think like Fred and George do.

I really don't have much to say, as not a lot went on here. Um... so, I guess I'll ask this - How come there aren't more Harry/Fleur fics? Maybe I just have a thing for underwritten pairings, but I think this one would go really nicely, if properly set up. I think I can safely say that this might be a bit of foreshadowing on my part. But I won't say anything past that. You guys will just have to wait for book 4 (or possibly 6) to find out what the hell I mean.

I also wouldn't mind seeing Harry/Pansy if it was done right. There's this weird thing I have about wanting to reference pansies and 'wintergreen' at some point. But I won't be having her come anywhere within 'friendly' range of Harry. She's well chuffed with being Draco's arm-float for now. So that's it for now. NOW I'll be going off to jot up a THIRD version of a Chamber Chapter Guide. You guys really don't wanna see what the last two have looked like. Urf.

Chapter 4 – Memories in the Rain

"Come on! We don't have much time! We're going to be late!"

"Gah, come *on*, Harry!"

"Well, where'd you lot put my good socks!"

"Your *good* socks!"

"They're probably under the bed, Harry. If they aren't, I'll send them to you once you're at Hogwarts - we need to get going!"

"Alright, alright, I found them! Coming!"

Harry grabbed Hedwig's cage in one hand, his trunk in the other, and dashed from his bedroom at Number Nine. His trunk thumping as he took the stairs two at a time, Harry headed out the open front door right behind Tonks. Andromeda closed the door behind the two, then proceeded to usher them into the car.

"Hang on, mate." Tonks said in a stage whisper. "This is gonna be a bumpy ride..."

"Quiet, you." Andromeda said, rolling her eyes.

The trip was, in fact, almost as bad as Tonks made it out to be. When Andromeda needed to get somewhere quick, she knew exactly how to do it. And she wasn't afraid of taking the corners faster than sanity would allow.

They got to King's Cross ten minutes before the Hogwarts Express was set to depart. After hustling the kids down onto the platform, they saw that a few stragglers had yet to cross through the barrier. A few girls that Harry recognized as fifth-year (now sixth year) Hufflepuffs were talking to a man who looked at least ten years their senior. Harry only knew who the girls were because they seemed to be a part of the fan club Harry had seemed to gather. Terry Boot was conversing with a Gryffindor girl that Harry didn't know. And a few

younger children, who looked to be first years, were torn between hugging their parents and taking off for the train.

And, leaning back against the side of the column that held the barrier, looking far more haggard than Harry remembered him being, was Solieyu. Almost as if sensing that he was being watched, the boy looked up and over, a faint smile forming on his face as he spotted his friends.

"Leon!" Tonks cried, almost bouncing with her cart over to the long-haired boy. "How've you been? You look like you've been in a fight or somethin'!"

"Hey." Harry said in greeting as he and Andromeda caught up with Tonks. "She's right, you look a mess, mate. Anything happen?"

Shaking his head, Solieyu replied, "No, we were just in a rush to get here. Mother insisted on taking the Knight Bus."

"Bumpy ride, then?" Harry asked.

"Quite."

"Leon, this is my mum. Mum, this is Solieyu Reinhardt... he doesn't like *his* first name, either." Tonks said, giving Andromeda the evil eye.

"Ma'am." Solieyu murmured, lowering his head slightly.

Stepping aside to let other wizarding folk pass by, Andromeda looked at the wristwatch she was wearing. "Oh! You three can talk on the train. If you don't get through now..." Grabbing her daughter's hand, Andromeda headed for the barrier. "Come on, you lot! Nymmy, grab your cart!"

"Don't call me Nymmy!" Tonks said, twisting her hand away from her mother's. "We can get through the barrier, mum, we don't need you holding our hands!"

"Fine." Andromeda said, sounding exasperated. "I'll give you *one* minute to follow me through. No dawdling, understand? If you aren't back by then, I'm coming back and hauling you through myself."

"Yes, mum." Tonks droned.

Once Andromeda had passed through, Tonks sighed. "She's going to drive me completely loony some day."

"Not far to go." Harry said to Solieyu, loud enough for Tonks to hear. It earned him a slug on the arm.

"Well, if that's the way you feel, I'll just head on through, too!" Sniffed the girl. Grabbing her cart, she turned and, once making sure no Muggles were watching, rushed the column and vanished through it.

"I see where she gets her energy from." Solieyu commented, rounding about to grab his own cart. "Have you two had a good summer?"

"Um... well, best as can be expected, I suppose." Harry said, sighing. "I'll tell you about it once we get inside. I'm sure Tonks wouldn't want me to give the whole story when she wasn't present."

"Shall we both go at once, then? I don't think we'll be spotted with so few Muggles about..." Solieyu said, looking around and seeing that the station was remarkably empty of people.

"Sure." Harry said. "Hang on, Hedwig."

Standing back a few yards so that they could get some speed going, Harry and Solieyu pushed their carts towards the barrier... and practically bounced right back off of it. Harry, jarred by the sudden impact, nearly fell over before Solieyu's cart rammed into his back. This, in turn, caused Harry to practically topple over sideways, grasping at his cart's handle as he went. And, of course, his trunk - and Hedwig's cage - crashed to the ground as the cart tipped onto its side. Solieyu, meanwhile, was dragging his cart backwards and apologizing to Harry at the same time.

"What the hell was that?" Harry asked, quickly straightening his things and making sure his owl was alright. "Stupid barrier isn't supposed to do that, is it?"

"Not to my knowledge." Solieyu said, walking up to the column and pressing against it. It was as if there had been no magical barrier to pass at all. His hand felt around the column for a moment before turning to Harry and asking, "Any ideas?"

Harry felt around the column for a moment as well before frowning. "None..."

"It seems to me that the barrier was closed off..." Solieyu offered, turning to Harry. "I can still sense magic coming off of it, but..."

"Yeah, it's like it was blocked or so" Harry began. In the middle of the sentence, something in his brain clicked into place. A scowl formed on his face and, in an angry hiss, he growled, "I'm going to *kill* that house elf!"

Solieyu blinked. "Beg pardon?"

Slumping back against the column, Harry sighed. "Long story. And it looks like I'm going to be telling you without Tonks around after all. Got any parchment and a quill handy?"

Opening his trunk and fishing around, Solieyu nodded. He handed a bit of paper and the quill over to Harry, who placed it on the ground and began writing.

"If anyone could break a house elf's magic, it's Dumbledore. Though I hate to bother him like this. It just seems so damn stupid, you know?" Harry asked as he wrote. "'Dear Professor, a house elf jinxed the barrier and I can't catch the train' ... Honestly, he's going to think I'm batty..."

"Oh, I don't know." Solieyu said, sitting next to Harry. "Dumbledore's a bit crazy himself... And he does seem to like you an awful lot."

"Yeah, I suppose so. We didn't even lose Ravenclaw any points for getting past Fluffy..." Harry said. "Shame we didn't win the House Cup, but..."

Finishing the note, Harry opened Hedwig's cage and smiled. "We're in a bit of a mess here, girl. Make sure Dumbledore gets this as fast as possible, alright? I really don't want to be loitering here all day."

Hedwig nipped at Harry's finger affectionately as he attached the message to her leg, then took off out of the station. Harry and Solieyu watched her fly off.

"How long do you figure it'll take her?" Harry asked.

"A few hours, if the wind's not against her." Solieyu said.

"So what do we do until then?"

"You can start by explaining why you want to murder a house elf."

"What time is it?"

"Five minutes since the last time you asked me."

"Sorry."

"Not a problem. I'm horribly bored, too."

"I'm just glad the personnel here aren't bothering us."

"As am I."

"Can't believe they bought that story about us waiting on someone, though."

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, but even so. Dumbledore isn't exactly normal. Even if he were dressed properly as a Muggle, he'd stand out. I don't think I've ever seen anyone with a beard like his..."

"Indeed." Solieyu said, nodding slightly. "He...does stand out in a crowd, doesn't he?"

"Yup."

"Something, I assure you, I am quite proud of." Came a voice from somewhere behind the two boys.

Jumping slightly, Harry and Solieyu turned to see Albus Dumbledore leaning against the barrier column. He was smiling and had that seemingly ever-present twinkle in his eyes.

"Now how long have you been there?" Harry asked, getting to his feet. Both he and Solieyu had been sitting down and leaning back as they waited.

"I just arrived." Dumbledore said. "Now what is this about the barrier being jinxed?"

"Just that." Said Harry, pushing against the barrier. "I had a run-in with a vindictive little house elf this summer and I'm certain he's the reason me and Leon couldn't get through this thing. Take a look. Maybe it's just me, but it... it *feels* different. It's hard to explain."

Dumbledore - who looked quite odd in the black suit he was wearing - stepped about and glanced at the column slowly. "Mm... Yes, it has indeed been tampered with. Easily remedied, I assure you."

Placing a hand on the solid surface, the headmaster began murmuring softly under his breath. A few moments later, he frowned and tried again.

"Something wrong?" Asked Harry.

"It would seem so." Dumbledore said, tilting his head slightly. "I am not entirely sure what spell the elf used here. House elves have their own special brand of magic, you see, some of which is amazingly complex for such relatively simple beings."

Harry reached out to touch the barrier again, frowning as well. "I'll guess that it's not easy to work out at a glance, then."

"Correct." Said Dumbledore, smiling once more. "House elves are notorious for going over the top when it comes to using magic, as they so rarely get the opportunity *to* use it. Harry, did you sense that this house elf meant you any harm?"

"Not directly." Harry said, a shadow crossing his face for the briefest of moments. "But it's because of him that I had to escape that place."

"Yes, I got quite the earful from both Tonks women..." Dumbledore said, chuckling. "They both care for you a great deal..."

"Nice that someone does." Harry grumbled.

"Headmaster," Solieyu piped up. "I'll assume that we're going back to the school by means other than train?"

Glancing back to the barrier once, Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. I believe I'll let the Ministry handle this, as everyone but the two of you have boarded the Hogwarts Express for the year. We can take a Portkey to Hogsmeade and head up to the school from there. I'm afraid you may be bored, however. The train is not due to arrive for another three hours."

"Three hours? The ride never seems like it takes all day..." Harry commented as Dumbledore pulled out a galleon.

"This will be activating shortly. If you'd each please touch it – a finger will do. Your belongings shall be brought up to the school, so do not worry about leaving them here." Said Dumbledore, extending the coin. Harry and Solieyu both put a finger on it and waited.

"Three... two... one." Dumbledore said. And then, finally, Harry and Solieyu left King's Cross.

"I hate Portkeys." Harry said, rubbing his shoulder.

"You're just sour because you landed strangely." Said Solieyu.

"Yeah, well... I'm not good with magical transportation. Those things and Floo travel both. I'm not looking forward to learning how to apparate. I'll probably wind up splinching myself and leave something embarrassing behind."

"Don't say that around Tonks. You know what she'd say."

"Yes, I know what she'd say!" Harry said, lowering his head and blushing slightly. "Anyway, what're we going to do until everyone else gets here?"

"Might I suggest seeking out Professor Snape?"

Harry stopped, turned, and stared at his friend as if the boy had suddenly sprouted a few more eyes. "Now why would I want to go do that? It's pretty obvious we can't stand each other."

"You owe him an apology, Harry." Solieyu said. "You didn't take out Quirrell fast enough last year. Three Cruciatus Curses would affect anyone poorly."

"I'm not apologizing to him, Leon." Said Harry slowly. "The look he had on his face when Quirrell unwrapped his head... the way Voldemort spoke to him... I don't like thinking about what it could mean. I *really* don't like thinking that I know what it was all about. I trust Dumbledore, even if he does insist I go back to the Dursleys each summer..."

"You think Professor Snape could be a Death Eater?" Asked Solieyu.

"Maybe..." Harry said. "I dunno. I've never seen him expose his arms."

"I don't think you should assume anything about him, Harry. The last time you did, you almost died." Said Solieyu.

"Thanks for being so blunt." Harry griped.

"Someone has to let the air out of your tires." Commented Solieyu simply. "In any case, I think it would help if you apologized. What harm could it possibly do?"

"Yeah, I wonder..." Harry grumbled. But he followed his friend as he continued down the main stairway.

In the end, the two had chosen to go their separate ways. The school would be crowded and noisy in precious little time and each of them

wanted to savor the peacefulness that the silence brought. Harry decided to head to a spot he had found late in his first year. A stairway hidden behind a fake wall lead up to a secluded little tower that overlooked the grounds. Harry had found it by accident, leaning against the fake wall to rest on his way to the library. At night, the grounds looked absolutely beautiful.

But the day was steadily turning down a dreary road, with storm clouds moving in all too quickly. As Harry climbed up through the trapdoor and closed it underneath him, he walked out from under the sheltered portion to lean against the stone railing. A cool wind sent shivers down his spine. With a crooked grin, Harry decided he would try to spot the Hogwarts Express as it rolled into Hogsmeade.

This, of course, made Harry frown. Tonks was probably tearing her hair out with worry. Harry felt bad for not having Hedwig first deliver a note to Tonks, telling her that he and Solieyu were alright. But it was only a few hours until the train arrived, and it would probably do little now. And, after all, Hedwig had probably pushed herself as hard as she could to arrive at Hogwarts as swiftly as she had.

With a sigh that was lost on the wind, Harry turned around and sat, leaning back against the cool stones. What a summer he had had. Things certainly hadn't started out very well. And, if he stopped to really think about it, the ending wasn't that thrilling, either. But the part in the middle - that was what he had enjoyed most. Being with Tonks at her house. Feeling like he actually belonged. Feeling *loved*. Harry blushed at that final thought.

Tonks and her mother must have had the patience of the Buddha to keep dealing with him and his insane problems. She was still his friend, even after the chaos surrounding the Stone. She was still his friend, even after all the times he ended up getting hurt and worrying her. Harry thought it might just be due to the fact that he had been unwanted for most of his life, but he couldn't help but feel close to Tonks. It just felt *good* to have someone who was there for you, no matter what.

Humming softly to himself, falling back into an old habit, Harry closed his eyes and listened to the wind whistle along with his tune. And,

somewhere in the back of his mind, an event replayed. One that involved a midnight snack, a surprise guest, and the sudden realization that he was starting to have feelings for his best friend.

He knew, the moment that Tonks had let go of him in that kitchen, that he cared about her as more than simply just a friend. Again, he tried displacing the thought at first, telling himself that it WAS because he had been unwanted for most of his life. He certainly wasn't going to say anything, though. No need to make a fool of himself, after all. And he didn't want to come off as being needy. He liked how things were. Especially, he thought to himself as he slowly made his way down to the Entrance Hall, the times when he and Tonks stayed up late and she fell asleep. She would always end up leaning against him. Usually until Andromeda came to check on them. Then she would groggily get up, give Harry a peck on the cheek, along with a half-asleep hug and murmured 'goodnight,' and get toted off to her own room.

It was the one thing about Hogwarts that Harry didn't like. No more time alone with Tonks. This was something that bugged Harry, and he was officially planning on doing something about it. He had already gotten permission from Dumbledore to take Tonks aside and explain what had happened to her. This way, he wouldn't get into any trouble if he wasn't present at the Sorting. And, he thought, it was going to be a beautiful night, even with the rain.

Rain... Harry had never much liked it when he was little. It wasn't until he had entered school that he learned what storms really were. When he was very little, the Dursleys had instilled fear in him, saying all sorts of outlandish things of what thunder and lightning really were. It didn't help that he had a lightning-shaped scar on his forehead, either.

But ever since he had met Tonks... The rain brought only good memories. He had met Tonks after a rainy night. The two had spent several rainy nights at Number Nine trying to out-scare one another. Once, Tonks had caught him simply gazing out the window at the rain. When asked what he was doing, Harry had simply replied, "Remembering." This made Tonks confused, but Harry refused to elaborate on his mysterious answer.

His Metamorphmagus abilities had apparently grown much stronger over the summer. When Tonks and Andromeda sat down with him at one point, he was able to change his hair and eye color on command. The length and style of his hair, however, was still a problem. Tonks assured him that it wasn't that tough to master and insisted that he would do fine once they resumed their regular training sessions.

"So what have you been busying yourself with?" Came a voice from further downstairs. Focusing his gaze, Harry looked to see Solieyu sitting on the second step from the bottom, apparently waiting for the carriages to bring the students up to the school.

"Collecting my thoughts. Would you mind terribly if I spirited Tonks off once she gets here and sees we're both alright? I have something I want to show her." Harry said, joining his friend in sitting.

Raising an eyebrow, Solieyu asked, "And what would that be?"

Harry knew he must have blushed briefly, but shrugged it off and replied, "Oh, just a secret passage I found. S'got a nice view from the top. Anyway, if she's going to go crazy and yell at me, I'd rather it not happen in front of the assembled student body."

"Fair enough. Want me to keep tabs on the Slytherins?" Solieyu asked.

"Sure. Couldn't hurt. We'll make a dramatic entrance after the Sorting is finished... Or something like that." Harry said, gesturing vaguely with one hand while resting his chin on the other.

The two were silent for a moment.

"And let us hope no more like Terry join our ranks." Solieyu said.

"Amen to that."

Naturally, things didn't go as planned. Fred and George had gotten to Tonks early on, apparently, and had filled her head with all sorts of nonsense. Tonks looked as if she hadn't slept in a week when she had made her way through the crowd of students. Throwing herself at

Harry, who keeled over backwards and landed at a painful angle on the steps, she whimpered that she thought something horrible had happened to him.

Solieyu had been the one to point out how much pain Harry seemed to be in. Tonks then squeaked and dislodged herself from the boy, apologizing profusely. This seemed to amuse Solieyu, who was promptly smacked in the back of the head by Harry as he sat back up.

"Quiet, you." Harry muttered, rubbing his lower back. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"Ah, yes. Spy duty." Solieyu said, getting to his feet and dusting his robes. "I'll see you two in the common room later."

"And, if you can," Harry called after his friend, "Drop some pies on those infernal twins!"

"Later?" Tonks asked, watching as Solieyu filed into the Great Hall with the rest of the students. "We aren't going?"

"I figured you'd want the whole story. And I'd rather not do it in front of the whole school. I'm sure others noticed our absence." Harry said, rubbing his neck.

"Oh, yeah." Tonks said, making a face. "Malfoy and his makeshift beefeaters dropped in for a visit. Thankfully, the twins had dropped by earlier and sent them running along."

"Oh? How so?" Harry asked.

"Best not to ask." Tonks said, making another face. "It wasn't pretty. Anyway, where should we go to talk?"

"I know just the place." Harry said, smiling. "And I have permission from the headmaster, so we can't get in trouble for being out during the Sorting."

"Wow, we're *not* sneaking off this time? Do miracles never cease?" Tonks said dryly as Harry began walking back up the steps.

"Oh, hush. Look, Tonks... I'm really sorry for worrying you. I should have sent Hedwig to you before sending her to Dumbledore, but I wasn't really thinking clearly..." Harry said, slipping his hands into his pockets.

Tonks caught up with him and linked her arm with his, tilting her head. "It's alright... so what *did* happen?"

"Well..." Harry began. And, as he led Tonks to his secret passage, he once more went into a long spiel about house elf woes.

Judging by the 'ooooh' Tonks had let out once she had caught sight of the view, Harry guessed that she liked his getaway. It was raining fairly heavily now, but the two would stay dry as long as they didn't go out from under the roof.

"Why didn't you tell me about this place last year?" Tonks asked, looking slightly put-out.

"Only found it at the end. Barely had any time to use it myself." Harry replied, sitting down and stretching out.

Sitting down next to him, Tonks nodded. "So you spent most of late afternoon and evening up here? What did Leon do?"

"Meandered about the dungeons, of all things. You know, he wanted me to go and apologize to that greasy git Snape? We had a little discussion on whether or not Snape could've been a Death Eater in the past... Not sure which of us won that one." Harry explained. "Anyway, enough about what I've been doing. What did *you* do on the trip?"

"Well, the twins certainly didn't help. Between making my earlobes the size of an elephant's ears and making me think that Quirrell had broken out of St. Mungo's to kill you..." Tonks said, bottom lip jutting out slightly.

Harry laughed. "How on earth could you believe *that*?"

"Well!" Tonks said, pouting even more. "I couldn't help it! After how you turned up at our house this summer, I guess I just let my imagination run away with me..."

Turning his head slightly, Harry smiled crookedly. "You shouldn't pout, you know."

"Why not?" Pouted Tonks.

"It'll give you wrinkles." Harry said.

"It will not!" Tonks exclaimed.

"Will too. You watch. My cousin, Dudley, pouts more than any boy has any right to. He pouts when he's hungry and he can't have any food. He pouts when his favorite television show gets pre-empted. He pouts when he's told to shower. He"

"I get it, I get it." Tonks said, nudging Harry with her shoulder. "Get on with it already."

"Right, sorry. Anyway, I'll place a bet with you here and now. I bet you he'll look like a prune by the time we graduate." Harry said.

"No way! Alright, you've got yourself a bet! ...What're we betting?" Tonks asked.

Harry thought for a moment. As he sat and thought, the sounds of the heavily pounding rain and occasional thunder filled the air. It really was a nice night, if you liked the rain. And here Harry was, sitting next to his best friend, enjoying the peace as if they were the only two people in all of Hogwarts.

"A date." Harry finally murmured, turning to look Tonks in the eyes.

"A date?" Tonks repeated.

"A date. If I'm right, you have to go on a date with me." Harry said, hoping the darkness covered his blush.

"Hardly seems like punishment for losing, but alright. And if *I'm* right?" Tonks asked.

"Hmm... I dunno. You pick something." Harry said.

Tonks tilted her head back, drumming her fingers on the stone floor. "I... can't think of anything. Oh well, I'll work something out."

"Nothing weird. I don't want to have to drop my trousers in Diagon Alley and proclaim myself Master of Space and Time or anything." Harry said, giving Tonks the evil eye.

Tonks giggled, nudging Harry with her shoulder again. "Oh, fine. Take all the fun out of it. I *won't* ask Fred and George, then."

"Thank Merlin." Harry said.

The two sat in silence for awhile after that. Harry was finally unwinding. His muscles had been tense ever since that morning, which felt like days ago to him. Eventually, he closed his eyes, leaned his head back, and began humming softly.

A short time later, Tonks leaned her head over onto his shoulder and began humming with him. It was a slow tune that was easy to pick up. Something Harry used to hum to himself after particularly nasty beatings that helped to ease the pain and allow him to drift off to sleep.

After going through the tune a few times, Harry leaned his head over against Tonks' and murmured, "I really am sorry, Tonks. The last thing I'd want is to do anything to upset you..."

"I know." Tonks replied in an equally soft voice. "I'm just glad you're safe... Things would be mighty boring without you around, Harry..."

"Well, you'll be happy to know that I have no intention of escaping the planet's gravity and falling off the face of the earth." Harry said, chuckling quietly.

"Good." Tonks said simply. Then, as if to add emphasis, she wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug. "...We should come here to train."

"Yeah... no worries about anyone wandering in." Harry agreed.
"...Think we could come up and watch it rain again sometime?"

"Sure." Tonks said.

Harry could almost hear her smile.

Author's Notes: Holy crap, it's finally done! o.o Hopefully you won't have to wait over a month or so before the NEXT chapter, huh? I really, REALLY apologize for being so late with this. There's no real excuse. But between the mouse invasion keeping me awake at night and everything else that's been going on, I just haven't felt like writing at ALL.

But now that they're back at school, things should be much easier. Usually I like writing post-Hogwarts chapters, but, as I've said countless times now, I hate Chamber.

I'm pretty sure I didn't get any info on book 1 wrong, and I went back to scan through the chapters I needed to for reference, so if a tiny bit slipped, I apologize. Already I've gone a different path from the third version of the writer's guide I had jotted up. Originally, as Dumbledore arrived at King's Cross, a frustrated Harry would fracture the magic sealing the barrier. The whole of Chapter 5 was going to be Harry and Leon roaming. And THEN they would fill in Leon on what's been happening. I think Tonks was there in the original, too. But I wanted a cute moment between them when she arrived with the rest of the students. I hope everyone likes Harry's private little tower and the moment between the two.

Yes, Harry knows how he feels about Tonks. Or, at least, he's pretty sure he does. He has a bad tendency to overanalyze things, my version of Harry does.

So...yeah. Next time, a meeting with Malfoy, a class with Lockhart, and the introduction of ickle Luna the Firstie!

Chapter 5 – The Swing of Things

Remind me why I'm doing this."

"Because you'll fail the course and get ejected if ya don't. Now c'mon, or we'll be late!"

"... Fine. I'll go. But I'm *not* putting up with that golden dandy's tomfoolery."

Tonks rolled her eyes, tugging a reluctant Harry out of Ravenclaw Tower and towards the Defense classroom. Harry had been trying to worm his way out of the year's first Defense Against the Dark Arts class since the previous night. Solieyu, choosing wisely to remain out of the argument, was hanging back a few paces behind his friends. If nothing else, he could grab Harry if the boy somehow worked his way out of Tonks' vice-like grip.

"I'm serious, Tonks." Harry grouched. "If he comes sauntering into class, grinning as if he had just been shagged, I'm going to send the twins after him!"

"You'll get in trouble." Tonks retorted evenly.

"I get in trouble whether I want to or not." Harry replied, pulling a face. "Or hasn't that registered with you?"

"Oh, it's registered. But there's no sense in *trying* to get a detention with Snape, is there?"

"**HANG** Snape!" Harry roared, nearly tripping over his own robes.

"Like an old married couple." Solieyu sighed under his breath.

"What was that?" Tonks asked, looking over her shoulder at the long-haired boy, who shrugged in reply. It was going to be a very, very long day, indeed.

"This day just keeps getting better. About face." Harry said, turning around as he, Tonks, and Solieyu rounded the corner leading to the

Defense classroom. Malfoy, flanked as always by Crabbe and Goyle, was lingering by the door.

Without so much as a word between them, Tonks and Solieyu each grasped Harry by the arms and began dragging him backwards, heading for the classroom despite the Slytherins' presense.

"Can't figure out how to work a door, boys?" Tonks asked in mock sweetness. "I can help if you need it..."

At the sound of her voice, the Slytherins looked over. The blonde immediately sneered.

"Was wondering how long I could go before having to see you. After you failed to board the train, I was hoping you'd run off. Or worse." Said Draco, smirk firmly in place.

"I love you too, Malfoy." Harry replied dryly. "Now shove over and let us in. The sooner we get in, the sooner we can get *out*. I don't want to be in the same room with that ponce any longer than I *have* to be."

Malfoy snorted. "Can't stand being around someone who hogs more of the spotlight than *you* do?"

"Can't stand him at all." Harry said, shrugging his friends' hands off of him and turning about to properly address the trio of Slytherins. "You have no idea what he's like."

"Of course I do." Malfoy retorted. "I was in the bookstore on the day of his ridiculous signing. Your weasel friends' poor excuse of a father dared attack *mine* in broad daylight."

"Did he say how it felt to be dinged by a toilet seat?" Tonks asked.

Malfoy whirled on her, narrowing his eyes. "You watch what you say, girl."

"Don't speak to her like that." Harry said in a distinctly hard voice.

"Or you'll do *what*?" Malfoy asked, sizing Harry up. Behind him, Crabbe and Goyle began cracking their knuckles.

"Oh, -I- won't do a thing." Harry replied, a slight smile on his face. "I'll just inform the twins what you said about their father and give them free reign to use The List. The only reason your pink bits haven't turned to pinecones is because I've made them hold off until just the right moment. They're practically begging to unleash half the bloody tricks on you already. Do you *really* want to subject yourself to even worse humiliation than what you received *last* year, Malfoy? Honestly, I could care less if you wanted to sprout buttocks on the inside of your mouth, but..."

Malfoy snorted once more. "You think I can't handle myself against that pitiful, dirt-poor duo?"

Looking over his shoulder, as he had taken a few steps in from of his friends during his spiel, Harry asked, "Hey, Leon?"

"Yes?"

"What say you?"

"I doubt he could."

"Tonks?"

"I'd love seein' him try."

"Agreed. Malfoy, we'll extend your challenge to Fred and George at lunch. Now, if you'll excuse us, we need to get into that blithering idiot's classroom." Harry said, brushing past Malfoy and heading into Defense.

Tonks shook her head as she and Solieyu followed, commenting, "Do you even think he'd notice anyone missing? Too busy grinning at himself in mirrors oroh, sweet Merlin, is that a blown-up portrait of **HIMSELF** on that wall!"

"I am covered in pink stuff."

"At least it doesn't smell that bad. Know any good, thorough cleansing charms, Leon?"

"I...am *covered*...in pink stuff."

"Mm, not really. Let's just find Professor Flitwick. I'm sure he can help us out."

"I am *covered*... in **PINK** stuff!"

"He should be in his office grading papers at this hour, shouldn't he?"

"I'M BLOODY COVERED IN PINK STUFF!"

"Yes, Tonks, we know. We are, too, but you don't hear **US** complaining about it."

"Yeah, Nymmy, button down. It's not *that* bad. In fact, I think your hair looks pretty good pink."

Tonks blinked with the one eye that wasn't covered in light-red goop.
"You think so?"

"Definitely." Harry said, nodding.

"Hmm..."

To say that the first Defense class had gone awry would be a gross understatement. Harry *still* wasn't sure what the class had been up against, as Lockhart had bolted the minute the creature started spraying pink gunk all over. This left a class of Ravenclaw and Slytherin second-years to fight it back into its charmed cage. It couldn't spray anything from in *there*.

It was about a meter, both heightwise and lengthwise. It was colored an almost neon pink, it was so bright. It had what appeared to be spiny feathers covering its body, as if someone had mated a flamingo and a porcupine. It carried itself about on long, spindly bird legs and had eyes so tiny that they were almost nonexistent. The goo it spewed came from out of its mouth. No one quite knew what it was. No one quite wanted to, either.

It was sheer bedlam inside the class. Once Lockhart had released the creature from its protected box, it went completely ballistic. Lockhart

got a mouth full of whatsit, squealed in horror, and fled. Malfoy and his goons began laughing...until they were targetted. Malfoy's flawless hair received a pink gel as a going-away present, as the Slytherins up and fled shortly thereafter, Draco shrieking like a girl.

Terry Boot, of all people, had been the one to finally subdue the thing. While the creature had been hosing down Pansy Parkinson, Terry had crawled up behind it and tackled it about the legs, sending it crashing to the ground. Almost as if sensing their chance for escape *and* retribution, practically the whole class had thrown basic stunners. Thankfully, whatever it was seemed to be entirely weak against magical attacks and was rendered harmless.

The Ravenclaw trio spent a good half hour hunting their head of house down, eventually finding him in the library. After getting an earfull from Madam Pince about dripping 'whatever it was' on her floor, Professor Flitwick removed the sludge from them and sent them on their way.

Groaning as he sat in his favorite chair in the Ravenclaw common room, Harry closed his eyes. It had been a long day. Too long. Apparently, Lockhart had tried showing the whatever-it-was to some of the older students and received the exact same results. By the time supper had rolled around, few people who had been in Lockhart's class liked him. Mainly the female population, who liked him on his looks alone and didn't even seem to mind being slimed due to his dottering incompetence.

"You're Harry Potter." Came a soft voice from Harry's left, causing the boy to jump.

Opening his eyes, he turned to see a girl that didn't look too much younger than him. She had dirty blonde hair that hung down to the center of her back, very pale eyebrows, and had eyes that reminded Harry of an owl's. She was also staring at him quite intently.

"You're Harry Potter." She repeated after a few more moments of staring at one another.

"Er...that's right..." Harry said.

"I know all about you." Said the girl in a strange voice.

"You do?"

"Oh, yes. My father is the editor for "The Quibbler," and he's run all sorts of stories about you." Said the girl in a matter-of-fact way.

"Um... well, that's nice, I suppose." Harry said, now feeling distinctly uncomfortable. "So...you know my name, right? Well, what's yours?"

"Oh, I'm Luna. Luna Lovegood." Said the girl, smiling serenely.

"Well...Hello then, Luna. Nice to meet you..." Harry said, extending a hand to the girl.

Luna, who looked at it with her head tilted to one side for a while, finally grinned back up at Harry and murmured, "I need to go finish my Charms work now."

With that, the strange girl had left just as suddenly as she had arrived. This left Harry feeling so off-kilter that he completely forgot about what a bad day it had been. When Tonks arrived a good half hour later - she had been in the library, going over some of the finer points of turning a needle into toothpick - she asked Harry why he looked so mystified.

Harry could only give a vague recount of his chance encounter with Luna Lovegood. Tonks let out a laugh at this and, at Harry's confused gaze, explained, "Finally met her, huh? She's cornered both me *and* Leon so far. Bit loony, don'tcha think?"

"Definitely." Harry agreed.

"So Ron's been alright to you so far this year?"

"Loads better. In fact, he actually apologized at the table during the start of term feast."

"Really? ...The twins weren't behind it?"

"Not that I could tell."

"Huh... Well, that's good. I guess he got politeness drilled into him over the summer or something, then."

"I hope so."

Harry was walking towards the library a few weeks later to look up information on his current Potions work. By chance, he had nearly collided with one Hermione Granger as they both came around a corner at the same time. As she was heading in the same direction he was, he decided to catch up on how she had been.

"If he *does* start up again, just tell the twins that they have my permission to start." Harry said.

"To start? To start what?" Hermione asked.

"The new and improved prank list." Harry said. "They were working for a good chunk of the summer on it, judging by all they told me. I'd hate to be on the receiving end of **ANYTHING**. Tonks and I are right amateurs compared to those two."

"I wish they'd stop that, though." Hermione said, voice tinted slightly with annoyance. "They lost quite a lot of points for Gryffindor last year..."

"Oh, they gain it all back, eventually. Right?"

"Well... yes, but that isn't the point."

Harry grinned crookedly. "So true. And now, for a painfully blatant attempt to change the subject! How was your summer, Hermione?"

"Oh, it was lovely!" Hermione beamed. "In fact, I had to spend most of the first few days just going over everything that had happened with my parents!"

Unable to force back the faint twinge of jealousy he felt, Harry just nodded. Hermione took this to be indication to continue.

"My mum was happier for me than my dad, I think..." Hermione continued, looking thoughtful for a moment. "But I think he's just worried about his daughter being off somewhere he can't monitor."

"Protective, is he?"

"Quite." Hermione confirmed. "But he's just trying to look out for me. I'm sure I'd be worried if any children of mine were off at a strange school for the better part of the year."

"Especially when you tell them the tales of what I got up to?" Harry asked, voice dry.

Hermione swatted him on the arm. "Don't be silly. Of course I didn't. I don't know the whole story, anyway. Just the rumors that went around. Care to fill me in on the whole thing?"

"Not really. It still hurts *my* head to think about." Harry said, frowning slightly.

"Oh... Well, if you change your mind, I'd love to hear about it" Said Hermione, smiling. "And enough about me, how was *your* summer, Harry?"

Seeing his face visibly darken, Hermione blinked. "Harry?"

Entering the library, Harry shook his head. "It's a long story. Better sit down first. And I'd rather it not got out, so..."

"Oh, don't worry. I keep my promises. And I promise to not tell a soul." Hermione said, setting the books she had been carrying down on a table and pulling out a chair to sit in.

Sitting down next to her, Harry recapped what had happened to him since the end of their first year. Hermione, for her part, was a brilliant one-person audience for him, gasping at all the right moments and being outraged on his behalf.

"...And that's about it. Me and Leon arrived a few hours ahead of everyone else and wandered about aimlessly until the rest of the students got here." Harry finished.

"Oh, that's awful! I've read all about house elves, of course. They've got frightfully strong magic. Only they rarely ever use it." Hermione stated.

"Why's that?"

"Well, because of the contract between wizard and elf, I suppose" Hermione said. "House elves can't betray their masters. A bit stupid, if you ask me."

"I wouldn't mind making Dobby work as slave labor for *my* relatives" Harry said, darkly.

"After what you've been through, I'd imagine so..." Hermione said, frowning. "Really, are you okay?"

"All better now that I'm back here. Hogwarts is more a home than Number Four's ever been." Harry said with a smile. "Don't worry about me, Hermione, really. I've been through worse."

Her lips thinning, Hermione nodded. "So I've heard. Well, do be careful, alright?"

"Always try to." Said Harry, looking off towards the library's shelves. "...I've got Potions work. What about you?"

"I need to write an essay for Defense Against the Dark Arts." Hermione said. From the way she spoke, Harry couldn't help but think that she might be one of the girls that way infatuated with Lockhart.

"That golden dandy can take a hike." Harry grumped, throwing caution to the wind. "I smelled like stewed prunes for nearly a week after he up and abandoned us to that...that..."

"Pink-Bellied Muskonk."

"Beg pardon?"

"That's what it was. A Pink-Bellied Muskonk." Hermione said.

"Oh. Well, whatever it was, it coughed up its goo onto most of our class. We had to hunt Professor Flitwick down just to get it off" Harry groused.

"Oh, now, I'm sure Professor Lockhart just thought..." Hermione began.

"...that *he's* supposed to be in control?" Supplied Harry, grinning crookedly once more.

For his remark, he was issued another swat to the arm.

The next morning, Harry, Tonks, and Solieyu were just entering the Great Hall for breakfast when a commotion filled the air. A squeal filled the strangely-silent room and, for a moment, Harry wondered which girl could have let it out.

His question was answered - sort of - a moment later when Draco Malfoy ran by at top speed. He was clutching his backside and gibbering as loudly as possible. He even ran face-first into a wall on the opposite end of the Entrance Hall.

"Tonks?"

"I'm going to say it was the one that they used on the train." Tonks said, pulling a face.

"Leon?"

"No clue."

"I'm going to go with Bottom-Out Biscuits."

"For breakfast?" Tonks asked, raising an eye.

"...Hey, I don't know what Malfoy eats. Nor do I want to. Look, there's Fred and George - let's just go *ask* them which prank they unleashed on him."

At the Gryffindor table, Fred and George Weasley were trying hard not to laugh into their eggs. However, when the Ravenclaw trio walked up, neither twin could hold it back any longer.

Through their laughter, George asked, "Did... did you see the look on his face!"

"Malfoy screams like a little girl!" Fred howled. He promptly got a hard elbow to the side from Ginny, who was sitting on the side that George wasn't occupying. "...No offense, Gin." He wheezed.

"Which number?" Tonks and Harry asked at the same time.

Of course, this only caused the twins to laugh harder. It took five more minutes before any of the Ravenclaws could work information from the redheads.

"It was Number Sixteen!" Fred said, proudly.

"Smoldering Butt!" George declared.

"Figured out something to go with the phrase, then?" Harry asked, thinking back to what they had written in their letter.

"Oh, did we ever. Malfoy's going to be breathing fire from his hind quarters for an hour!" George cackled.

"Much better than smoke. I approve." Tonks said, grinning from ear to ear.

"So do I. Very nice!" Harry agreed. The two then began applauding in a painfully silly, polite manner.

"I'm surrounded by maniacs." Muttered Solieyu, who turned to go and get some breakfast before the meal was officially over with.

"Aww, come on back!" Tonks called.

"Not a chance." Said Solieyu, waving over his shoulder as he crossed the room.

"I'm almost sorry we missed the start of it." Harry lamented.

"Oh, you didn't miss anything, really. There's a five minute timer of sorts on it. You just start feeling *really* sick, like you need a toilet more than ever before. Malfoy's probably just now really getting into his hour of fun." Fred said, smirking.

"Oh, that's wonderful - I'm trying to eat here!" Ginny cried. With a scowl, she moved to stand up, grabbing each of her older brothers' heads and smacking them together. "But it looks like I've *somehow* lost my appetite."

Letting out a cry of pain, the twins made faces as their little sister stomped out of the Great Hall. Harry and Tonks also watched, eyebrows raised.

"What's with her?" Harry asked. "Wasn't *that* graphic a detail."

"Dunno. She's been acting odd for a week or so now, hasn't she, George?" Fred asked.

Rubbing his head, George nodded. "Yeah. She acts like she's under the stress from taking O.W.L.s or something. We dunno what's wrong with her. And Ron's not the type of person to ask."

"Try getting Hermione to ask?" Harry suggested, scanning the table and not seeing his friend.

"We might, if this keeps up much longer." George said. "Honestly, she's been in the common room sometimes and just randomly throws her quill down, lets out this strangled cry, and storms off!"

"Talked to McGonagall or Madam Pomfrey about it?" Tonks asked.

"Nah." Fred said. "Didn't seem that bad. Just first-year frights, we'd guess."

"Probably just too worried that she'll wind up being as useless as Neville is in Potions or something." George continued.

"Neville doesn't like Snape either, huh?" Harry asked.

"Dead scared of him, more like it." George said.

"Can't say as I blame him." Harry muttered.

"Too right." George continued. "Anyway, you two better go and eat. There's about ten minutes left. If you hurry, your food might still be warm!"

"That much time's gone by?" Tonks absently asked. "C'mon, Harry. I need food."

"When *don't* you?" Harry wondered aloud as he was physically tugged away from the Gryffindor table. And, as Tonks wasn't in a position to swat Harry on the arm, she simply retorted by rapping him on the top of the head.

"OW!"

Author's Notes: Come on, you *love* the idea that Lockhart's stupidity is the indirect reason why Tonks decides to start turning her hair pink. ADMIT IT! It's a pink hair cameo, though, because I hate cliches and pink-haired!Tonks is one of them!

If you haven't seen it by now, check my profile. The R-Series was vamped up a book. Mainly because I want a break before I set into the Auror thing... if I do at all. I'm starting to think that I may let Tonks and Leon go that path and keep Harry off, enjoying relative peace. Which isn't to say that he wouldn't be around, of course. Harry wouldn't be around what's now book 9 anyway for at least a *few* chapters. Probably not until after a story arc or two were complete. So he has a way back in. It just depends on what direction I take book 8 in.

Nothing really to do with anything here, but I just felt the urge to comment. Be sure to check my profile every so often. I tend to update the current status on chapters and the series as a whole regularly. Boredom and all.

And to put the final nail in the coffin, I'll say it again here - No, *Twilight* wasn't official. I tend to write snippets of things when writer's block, time, etc keep me away from the main story. I have dozens of little ficlet parts that no one will probably ever see. **HOWEVER...** Know

that *MOST* of the events in Twilight *are* going to happen. They just won't happen in one tangled mess like that. The Great Crash is a chapter unto itself, for instance. Harry regresses into himself earlier... or later... I've still not decided what book to *do* that in. It'll be six or seven, though.

And yes, the Honks-ness will go away. I'm not afraid to take chances in my writing. It wouldn't be any fun at all if, once they hooked up, they *stayed* that way. Are you insane? Hell, book 6 will probably be more Harry and Fleur until he sorts himself out. Book 8 will strictly be Harry and Pansy because dammit, I **LIKE** that pairing and demand more fics about them. And, well...Pansy is just important later on, alright? Come on, Potterfic writers, gimme more Harry x Pansy goodness!

But, as said, this series will end as Honks. So please, don't have a cow if I break them up, put them with others, and make them act like *real* teenagers, alright? This isn't a fairy tale. It's Harry Potter. Maybe a Grimm fairy tale. But not a normal one.

So...yeah. Expect the unexpected. Though given how I seem to blab the stuff I'm trying to keep quiet, good luck with that, huh? Blar. I gotta stop doing that. But people would come after me with a bloody lynch mob if I didn't explain my motives.

NEVER keep the characters together. Do it for short bursts until around the end when they *finally* get their horrid, twisted little lives sorted out enough to make *sense* of a true relationship. Then end on a high note. Do you guys follow? I hope you do. This isn't a straight-line romance, folks. This is a flippin' rollercoaster ride. So sit your butts down, make sure the harness is firmly in place, and don't hurl on the person sitting next to you.

And this, dear readers, is the **LONGEST** I will *ever* make my author's notes. I hate reading other peoples' author's notes. Especially when they thank each and every reviewer. I love reviews, but I'm not the type that thanks everyone individually. Just know that you lot help keep me going. If it weren't for the encouraging reviews back when I scrapped six chapters worth of Version 1, I never would have even gotten *this* far.

And as a side note, if you lot are reading this, it means I've managed to work out editing in FFN's wonky document manager. If so, disregard all the stuff in my profile about needing one. I just need to double-check my own work. Which gets covered when I go through HTMLizing stuff.

Chapter 6 – Confrontations

Is it strange, Harry? Being so utterly repulsed by something you need to survive?" Solieyu asked.

FLASH.

"...What? Did you want to give me a shoulder rub? You looked a bit put out at being anywhere near me." Harry sniped, crossing his arms.

FLASH.

"Because if you lay a single finger on me, I swear to Merlin and all of his descendants, I'll curse you so badly that muggle doctors won't ever be able to fix you." Harry said, voice growing dangerously quiet.

FLASH.

Vernon gaped like a fish for a moment before sharing a strange look with Dudley. Before either could reply, however, Forte moved. The snake lifted his head to peer in the Dursleys' general direction, his tongue flicking out a few times before he let out a low hiss. "The 'smaller' one - and I use the term lightly - reeks."

"Yeah, that's Dudley. He does that." Harry agreed.

FLASH.

He could feel his heartbeat start increasing as they took effect. No one was sending him to a larger version of the Dursleys' house. He wasn't going to be stuffed in an overgrown cupboard by this fool of a man.

"Minister. One thing, if I may." Harry said.

Fudge turned to stare at Harry as if he had suddenly grown a second head. The surprise was quickly replaced by a glare, however, and the Minister smiled gravely at him. "But of course... Muggles and their 'last requests,' is it? Go on, then. What is it?"

"You won't take me alive."

FLASH.

"You're the reason I'm alive." Harry answered, softly. "You're the one who put the idea of spell altering into my mind."

FLASH.

Harry quickly got to his feet, pressing his back up against Dumbledore's.

"Hello, Albus."

"Ah, Harry! Good of you to make it."

"Shall we?"

"Let's."

FLASH!

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry groaned, clutching at his head as he sat up. Groping blindly for his glasses, he only faintly registered how dark the room still was. Swinging his legs over the side of his bed, he put on some slippers and decided to leave Terry's annoyingly-loud snoring behind.

What the devil had that bizarre dream been about? Harry had been having a number of them lately. And, for almost a week now, something had been clouding them. A dark shadow that moved in and out, blocking the view of things. Whatever it was, it was monstrosously large. Harry put it all off to having too many sweets at dinner. As he flopped down onto the long sofa by the fireplace in the common room, he made a mental note to eat healthier from that point on.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry was awakened several hours later. Not by another strange dream, however. This time, the sounds of a heated argument woke him up. He immediately recognized Tonks' voice. He had heard her

get riled up on more than one occasion and felt sorry for whatever poor slob was on the receiving end of her ire.

"...I'll **NOT** do any such thing! Now get away before I send Fred and George after you!"

"What's the big deal? It was just a friendly little kiss!"

/Kiss?/ Harry thought, mind suddenly racing. That voice was irritatingly familiar...

"What's the big deal! I'm not some random floozy who'll let every bloke in the area snog with her!"

"It wasn't even on the lips, though!"

"That isn't the bloody *POINT!*"

"Yes, it **IS!**"

"It is *not!* Now get the hell out of my way!"

"Make me!"

"What did you say?" Tonks hissed.

"I said **MAKE** me!"

"Oh, I'll make you, alright!" Growled the girl. "I'll make you take a trip to the damn hospital wing if you don't move!"

"You wouldn't do that."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah! And what's more, I think you're getting all worked up over something insignificant!"

"You **KISSED** me!"

"Yeah. So? No reason to get your knickers twisted."

"So?! I don't let people just up and kiss me, you little twit!"

"C'mon, you liked it."

"**WHAT!**"

"Admit it! You didn't pull away!"

"I was too shocked to! It's not every day some guy I don't even like just sneaks up from behind me and kisses me!"

"Suuuure, Tonks... C'mon. You an' me, after breakfast, can find some nice, quiet spot and..."

Terry Boot never got to finish his sentence. Not caring about magic for the moment, Tonks pulled back a fist and sent it flying directly into his nose. Obviously surprised by the girl's aggression, Terry toppled over onto his backside, both hands coming up to his face as he cried out.

"You... you *hit* me!" He said, sniffing to try and keep more blood from dripping from the injury.

"I gave you fair warning to move." Tonks said, ice in her voice.

"You... you stupid, ugly, tomboyish--"

"*Cruento!*" Harry roared, moving swiftly from laying down to leaping over the back of the sofa and hexing Terry before he could finish his insult.

There was a pause, all too brief, before Terry went wide-eyed and began screaming at the top of his lungs. Harry glared down at him, venom in his eyes, before turning to Tonks. "Morning."

Tonks blinked, looking from a pajama-clad Harry to a shrieking Terry. "What did you do to him?"

"Illusion. Makes him think he's covered in blood. Rational thought tends to shoot out the window when you're all red, I'd assume. And

before you ask, I read about it. This is the first time I've ever used it. Perfectly harmless."

"Guess it works." Tonks commented.

"Guess so. *Finite*." Harry said, waving his wand to remove the spell from Terry, who instantly went quiet again. Before the fallen boy could speak again, Harry growled, "You'd do well to watch your tongue, Terry. It'll get you in deep one of these days."

"My hero." Tonks said, rolling her eyes.

"Hey, you got to punch him. I wanted a go." Harry said, defensively.

"Oh, very well. I'll let you off *this* time, Mr. Potter. Now off with you. It's almost nine and you're still in your pajamas." Tonks said, swatting Harry on the arm as he passed by her to go change.

"Yes, dear!" He called as he climbed the stairs. Seconds later, he let out a surprised yelp as Tonks' hex hit him square in the buttocks.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"Terry's lucky I didn't do worse." Harry growled later as the trio made their way down to lunch. "Bad enough he went running to Flitwick. He cost his own blasted house points, the little snitch!"

"You *did* make him think he was covered in blood." Tonks pointed out.

"Shut up." Harry groused, crossing his arms. "I'll cover him with the real stuff next time."

"Oh, don't be silly." Tonks said, waving a dismissive hand Harry's way. "You're too sweet to hurt anyone."

"Oh, that's just grand. Harry Potter, Boy Who Mewled."

Tonks snorted. Then, seeing the sour expression on Harry's face, asked, "It really bothers you that much?"

"Yes!" Harry exclaimed, sighing in frustration. "Did you think I've been *acting* this whole time!"

"Well! Sometimes it's hard to tell with you..." Tonks said, defensively.

"I don't kid around when you're involved. Not like that." Harry said, suddenly quiet.

"What do you think, Leon?" Tonks asked, looking over her shoulder at her long-haired friend. "Think it's tough to tell when Harry's acting an' when he isn't?"

"I think," Solieyu said, "that no one should be subjected to thinking they're covered in blood."

Picking up pace, Solieyu passed between his friends and continued to the main stairway. Blinking, Harry and Tonks looked to one another.

"What got into him?" Harry asked.

"Dunno. Maybe he didn't sleep well?" Suggested Tonks.

"He never sleeps. At least, as far as I've seen." Grumbled Harry. "I swear, if it takes me all year, I'll figure out what's up with him."

"Yeah, he seems kinda irritable today. Wanna go catch up and find out why?"

"Sure."

"You know I'll be diving behind you if he starts hurling spells our way, right?"

"Oh, sure. *Now* you want me to be your knight in shining armor."

"Why would it be any other way? Come on!"

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"I love the rain." Harry commented that evening as he and Tonks arrived in his secret tower. As the afternoon had passed, a dreariness floated in, eventually giving way to a downpour. Given that Terry had practically been stalking Harry and Tonks for the whole of the day after that morning's events, Harry was eager to get away from it all for awhile.

He had invited Solieyu up with them in case he ever needed a place to sit and think. But the dark-haired boy had turned him down, saying that he needed to head to the hospital wing on the account that he was feeling slightly ill. Indeed, he had looked a little grey. Harry had thought about following him, but a sudden crash of thunder changed his mind. He still had almost six full years at Hogwarts to get through. He could afford to have some free time that didn't involve sneaking about.

"So I've heard." Tonks replied, rolling her eyes. She walked up behind Harry, who was half-in and half-out, the front half of his body getting positively drenched. His head was tilted up and he had his eyes closed, soaking in the weather in more ways than one.

"I'm not hefting you off to Madam Pomfrey if you get sick." Tonks murmured after getting bored watching Harry imitate a statue.

Harry looked over his shoulder at Tonks, grinning crookedly. "Oh? Well, then... Does that mean *you'll* be nursing me back to health should I get sick?"

Tonks snorted. "Can you picture me dressed up like that old harpy?"

"I can." Harry said.

"Hmph. Some friend *you* are."

Harry chuckled, turning and walking towards Tonks. "Oh, don't pout. You know I was kidding..."

Tonks turned her nose up and sniffed dramatically. "Do I, now?"

"Yup. What's more, you know I was kidding *and* you think the idea is positively hilarious." Harry stated.

"... Well, alright. I guess me in that get-up *would* be kinda funny. But definitely not 'hilarious,' Potter." Tonks said, scowling at Harry.

Harry took his wand out and dried himself magically, a shiver running up his back as he finished. Once he was, he stepped up beside Tonks and gazed back out at the rain. "Calming, isn't it?"

"When it's just rain, it is." Tonks said, shifting her weight so she could lean into Harry's side. "I don't much care for thunder."

Looking aside at her, Harry licked his lips, then tentatively asked, "What about lightning?"

A smile formed on Tonks' face, though she kept her head low enough so as not to show Harry. "Oh, it's alright, I guess."

"Just alright?" Harry asked. There was a slight squeak to his voice.

Tonks bit her lower lip to keep herself from laughing aloud. Clearing her throat once she was sure that she wouldn't crack up, she continued, "Yeah. I mean, lightning's *very* dangerous, you know."

"Uh... yeah, I guess it is..." Harry said, frowning as he thought back to the end of his first year.

Tilting her head enough to catch his expression, Tonks shut her eyes and murmured, "Though there *is* something mesmerizing about it... very mysterious, too."

Harry blinked, looking at Tonks again. She was openly grinning at him now. A few coherent thoughts later and Harry made a face. "Don't **DO** that!"

"Don't do what?" Tonks asked, making her eyes as big and innocent as she could.

"Don't do... whatever the hell *THAT* was!" Harry sputtered, indignantly.

"Don't make you worry, you mean?" Tonks asked, smiling again.

"Worry? Who's worried?" Harry huffed.

"Yooou are, Mr. Potter." Tonks said, prodding him in the arm.

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not."

"Are too. And as a woman, I'm naturally always right. So you can't argue anymore!" Tonks stated.

"That's the most absurd thing you've ever said." Harry declared.

"Course it isn't." Tonks said. "I've said things loads stranger than *that*."

"Name *one*." Challenged Harry.

Thinking, Tonks eventually replied, "What about that time I asked Snape if the Festering Fungus Potion could be used on toenails?"

"That was just gross. Not absurd." Harry said, raising an eyebrow.

"Okay, well... What about the time I asked him if you could blow real bubbles with the Bubbling Boil-Remover?"

"That was random. Still not absurd."

"Oh, come on! You aren't being very fair, y'know." Tonks said, her lower lip jutting out.

Smirking, Harry peered over at her and said, "I know."

"Oh, don't you smirk at *me*, Harry Potter." Tonks said, narrowing her eyes.

"And whyever not?" Asked Harry.

"Because I know all the spots you're most ticklish in!" Tonks cried, lunging at Harry. For his part, Harry let out a frantic squeak as he was pounced to the ground. This was followed by an equally-frantic pleading for Tonks not to tickle him. And this, of course, simply gave way to hysterical giggling.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

A few days later, Harry was just entering the library when he was grabbed about the arms and dragged back into the hall. He began to protest, but was stopped when he saw who his makeshift attackers were. Fred and George Weasley, looking distinctly unlike themselves. For one thing, they weren't smiling at all. Indeed, both of them looked rather troubled.

"Harry," Fred began, his voice low, "We've got a favor to ask."

"Remember us mentioning how our dear little sister seemed to be a bit wound-up?" George continued.

Without waiting for Harry to nod, Fred went on, "She seems to've gotten worse. She's been mentioning being unable to recall what she's done at certain points in the day. It's only been the last few days or so, but it's enough to worry us. She just sniped us out of the library and..."

"...we thought we'd send you in, since you so conveniently showed up like that." Finished George as his brother took a gulp of air.

Processing this bit of information, Harry asked, "Why me? Why not take her to Madam Pomfrey? She knows what she's doing."

"Because Ginny *fancies* you." George murmured, nudging Harry, who lit up like a Christmas tree.

"I...I *beg* your pardon?" He sputtered once he found his voice again.

"S'true!" Fred said. "Past summer, she just would *not* shut up about you. She threatened to hex Ronnie's pink bits off if he kept being a complete git to you and your friends."

"Delightful." Harry said, blandly.

"Utterly." Agreed George. "Look, please? Just go in and try talking to her? I'm sure she'd do anything you ask her to. Just mind whose sister you're talking to."

"Yeah. You're both too young to be thinking about that kinda stuff, anyway." Fred added.

Sputtering once more, Harry asked, "And just what do you think I'd ask of a girl I barely even *know*?!"

"That's the spirit!" Fred declared, slapping Harry on the back. "Now get in there and find out what the hell is wrong with our ickle sister!"

And, before he could utter a word of protest, he was grabbed by his shoulders, spun around, and shoved into the library. The twins closed the doors behind him, using enough force to cause everyone in the immediate area to look over at Harry, annoyance written on their faces. From somewhere at the far end of the library, Harry even thought he heard Madam Pince utter a loud '**SHH!**'

Spotting Ginny, who looked much worse than she had last Harry saw her, he tentatively walked towards her. She had three large books set out before her and seemed to be working on an essay of some sort. Her brows were close together and she seemed like she was getting increasingly frustrated as she read.

Licking his lips and feeling more than a little nervous, Harry stopped on the other side of the table she was at and cleared his throat. After a moment of no response, he tried again. This time, Ginny slammed her quill down onto her parchment and growled out, "What IS it! Honestly, why don't you two just leave me al--"

She had turned to glare up at who she assumed were her older brothers, come back to bother her some more. Harry couldn't remember seeing someone's face go from pure annoyance to a mixture of embarrassment and astonishment so quickly. She was wide-eyed as she stared up at him, her mouth slightly open.

"Uh... hi?" Harry offered, smiling feebly.

"H...Ha..." Ginny began.

"Harry, yeah..." Said Harry, feeling his own cheeks heat up slightly. To call the situation awkward was an understatement. He would have to do something to Fred and George to get them for putting him in such a situation. "Um... look... are you, uh... are you alright?"

"Alright...?" Ginny echoed, still looking shocked at who was speaking to her.

"Yeah... I mean, Fred and George seem to think something's bothering you. I'm not saying I agree with them or anything, but... Well... You do look a bit frazzled, if you don't mind my saying so..." Harry said, head tilting to one side. "I'm not really good at it or anything, but I can listen if you need someone to talk to. Just don't go hoping for worldly advice. I'm awful with it. But... you know... Tonks says I -listen- really well. That has to count for something, doesn't it?"

Harry knew he was babbling. He clamped his mouth shut to force himself to stop, glaring down at the table in frustration.

Ginny was silent for a few moments and seemed about to reply when Harry was grabbed roughly by his right ear. Letting out a surprised squawk as he was tugged to his feet, Harry looked over his shoulder, wild-eyed, and saw a pair of hard-blue eyes glaring back at him.

"Tonks!" Harry croaked. "What's going on? What's wrong? Would you *please* let go of my ear!"

Tonks did so, but continued glaring at Harry, occasionally having to brush one of her light-blue strands of hair away from her eyes.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Harry asked, turning to face his friend while rubbing at his poor ear.

"Nothing." Tonks gritted out. "Nothing at ALL."

And with that, the bluenette turned and practically stomped her way out of the library. Harry stared after her, shaking his head slowly. "I'll never understand women." He muttered to himself. Turning back towards Ginny, he shrugged weakly and said, "Sorry. I dunno what's wrong with Tonks today... She wasn't upset last time I saw her..."

Ginny was looking at him strangely, as if trying to figure out some profound detail about him. Then, something seemed to pass across her eyes and she blushed, staring down at her homework again. "I... I should go... I'll be late for dinner as is..."

Well, it was a complete sentence. That had to count for something. But as he watched Ginny quickly pack her things, Harry slid down in his chair and sighed. The day just wasn't turning out how he was hoping it would. One girl was inexplicably *mad* at him over something... and another was too shy to even get out a full sentence without stumbling over her words.

Harry rubbed at his left eye, feeling a sudden pressure behind it. It was the telltale sign that a bad headache was in the making. Weighing his options, Harry decided that he could skip a meal. He needed to go somewhere peaceful to try warding away the potential migraine that seemed to want to form. Slowly getting to his feet again, Harry shuffled his way out of the library to make the trek back to Ravenclaw Tower.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

It was a few hours later, sometime around 9, that Solieyu returned to the second-years' dorm room. Harry was on his bed, stretched out with a pillow covering his eyes. Hearing the door open and close, he sleepily asked, "Who is it?"

"Me." Solieyu replied, simply. "You weren't down at dinner."

"Got a headache." Harry said. "Last thing I wanted was to be in a crowd of noisy people."

"Ahh. You wouldn't happen to have any idea why Tonks looked as if she could rampage through London, would you?" Asked Solieyu, sitting on the edge of Harry's bed.

Groaning, Harry shook his head. "No idea. I got forced into talking to Ginny Weasley by the twins earlier. I didn't exactly do a good job. But it didn't help that Tonks snuck up on me and more or less yanked me to my feet by my *ear*. She looked ticked about something, but she wouldn't say what. Then she said absolutely nothing was wrong and away she went."

"Mm." Said Solieyu, closing his eyes in thought.

"Any theories, Leon?" Harry asked, blowing out a slow sigh. "I don't *remember* saying or doing anything to trigger her wrath..."

"...I think she might be jealous."

"Come again?"

"Look at it from her perspective. She found you in the library, sitting and talking with a girl that she doesn't really know. That couldn't have looked good."

"So she's jealous that I was stumbling over my words, trying to figure out what's wrong with Ginny? I wouldn't have even noticed if the twins hadn't dragged me into the hall, told me to talk to her, then shoved me inside." Harry grumped.

"Yes, but Tonks wasn't there for that part, was she?"

"No, but she knows that Ginny is Fred and George's younger sister. And she knows that they think something's wrong with her! And while I'm going, what was up with you a few days ago when I hexed that twit Terry?" Harry asked, peeking an eye out from under the pillow to shoot Solieyu a glare.

"That's neither here nor there." Solieyu stated. "We're discussing Tonks. What I said is in the past, and there is where I plan to keep it."

Harry glared harder. "You know... You're a right bloody work of art, you are."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Harry said, sitting up and trying not to groan as light flooded his eyes again, "That you don't exactly act normal all the time, either. So you can't really talk to me about *other* people acting weird..."

"I've explained all of that before, Harry." Said Solieyu, looking off to the right. "I'm not a healthy person."

"Yeah... I'll bet." Harry said, fixing his friend with a penetrating gaze. "I don't buy that, though. I wish you'd just tell us what's going on,

Leon. It isn't like we're going to suddenly stop being your friends, you know."

"Harry... There are some things that a person just doesn't talk about. Can I trust you to leave this alone until I'm ready to explain things myself?" Solieyu asked.

"...I suppose. You *do* plan to explain, eventually?"

"Eventually." Solieyu said, nodding slowly. "Eventually, Harry. When I've come to terms with it myself. Anyway, you shouldn't be out after hours. You're going to lose us house points if you keep following me at night."

Harry opened his mouth, clearly about to ask Solieyu just *how* he knew that he had been following him, but he never got the chance. Solieyu had stood and was not standing over in the doorway.

"Talk to Tonks, Harry. I... don't think this is *entirely* your fault" Solieyu said, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, his train of thought derailed.

"Ah... Well... We *are* entering 'that' age. I'm sure it's the same for the girls as well." Solieyu said, making a face.

"I don't follow."

Rolling his eyes, Solieyu stared at Harry. "Are you a Ravenclaw or not? **Puberty**, Harry. I'm talking about *puberty*!"

"Well what's *that* got to... ...Oh. ...**Ohhhh**. Oh, ew. Ew and why? Ew **and** why?"

With a shrug, Solieyu started out. "I've no clue. But it might be worth taking into consideration. I'll see you later, Harry."

"Yeah..." Harry said, making a face of his own as Solieyu pulled the door closed. Briefly pondering why the human body was so annoying and *hideous*, Harry slumped back down and stuffed the pillow back

over his eyes. If anything, his headache seemed twice as bad as before. It was going to be a long damn night.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: Before anyone gets a shotgun or something, lemme state up front - no, Harry isn't a Seer in this. No, that stuff wasn't real. Yes, pieces of it may get thrown into a situation at some point in the future. I particularly like the line about Dudley and reeking. So don't get all worked up over stuff I don't really plan to include. Lines may stay the same, but situations tend to change depending on my mood at the time.

Now then. We got an interesting encounter with Terry - which *DOES* have a purpose, I might add, aside from making him look like an even bigger loony than he did in PSR - a nice, rainy bit between Harry and Tonks, Leon acting strangely, Ginny acting strangely, and *Tonks* acting strangely. Strange chapter, isn't it?

I hope the formatting works properly this time. I'm not all that big on the centered oOoOo-things, but it's better than a strangely formatted fic. Now if I could just deal with where **I'D** like to break my paragraph lines and stuff. Blar.

The next week or so *may* prove a little slow as far as writing goes. The new anime season has started, see. Ahh, spring. Checking out raw episodes, I've already found *six* new series I'll probably keep up with, to say nothing of the handful still going. But no new games are coming out until the end of the month, so aside from staring at subtitles for too long, I have all the time in the world to write. If my muses and the anti-writer's block spray allow it, of course.

Plus I have that Zim fic going. So I'll probably complete chapter 2 of it before starting chapter 7 of this. I hope you guys enjoy having a chapter early. I figured I owed it to you guys after chapter 5 taking bloody forever to get put up. I really am sorry about that. Next time... uh... I dunno. Harry's going to confront Tonks and wind up in a fairly compromising position in front of most of the school. That's right, ladies and gentlemen, puberty has officially set in on our gang. And guess who gets her first stumble?

Chapter 7 – Trick or Treat, Part 1

Harry sighed. The school year had started out on a bad note and it just didn't seem to want to let go of the hold it had over him. If one thing wasn't going wrong, another was. Case in point, the annual party on Halloween was coming up and, while she wasn't ignoring him anymore, Tonks seemed to keep more of an eye on Harry than she ever had before.

In addition to this, Luna Lovegood, the bizarre first-year that had approached Harry, was making studying in the common room increasingly difficult. And not just for him. Several people looked as if they were annoyed with the girl. Maybe it had something to do with her constantly trying to explain creatures that, to Harry's knowledge, simply didn't exist. That, or the way she kept running around and yelling at things that weren't there. One evening, Harry was disturbed from a very nice book on ancient Egypt and its culture by Luna leaping down the steps, running around the couch a few times, and crying out, "Come back, Chickenfoot! You aren't a freak! You're just **STUPID!**"

Solieyu hadn't been much help, either. The sickly boy had made himself scarce whenever Tonks was on the rampage, leaving Harry to fend for himself. Most of the time, Tonks would just sit down on the arm of Harry's favorite chair and glare at him as he read. Eventually, he learned to tune this out.

He had *tried* asking her what was wrong, but she kept turning up her nose and walking away, which *certainly* wasn't helping matters any. So Harry had decided to try riding it out, wondering if puberty could be attributed to *all* of Tonks' strange behavior.

The day after the incident in the library, Harry had run into the twins out by the greenhouses. He had given a full account to Fred and George, who had a few choice words to offer Harry on his women troubles. Which, of course, was all completely useless and somewhat embarrassing to hear.

At least there hadn't been a load of homework so far. The teachers were obviously upping the ante as far as difficulty went, but it wasn't

near the amount of work that the fifth and seventh years seemed to already be getting. But then, Harry perfectly understood why they were being worked frantic. He didn't think it was particularly *healthy* to do that to teenagers, but he understood it.

In addition to his regular work, Lynch was working the team harder than ever in Quidditch practice. Harry had won Ravenclaw all the matches that they had competed in, but Lynch hardly saw that as an excuse to ease off. But Harry didn't mind this so much, as it gave him a chance to fly and let his worries go for a brief period of time. He could often be seen lingering behind after the rest of the team decided to turn in for the day, floating around the top of the stands and gazing off into the horizon.

They would need a new Chaser *and* a new Keeper come the following year. Harry hoped that they would find suitable replacements for Allenby and Gainsborough. Carol Allenby had taken a liking to Solieyu. Or so it seemed to Harry. She could often be seen pulling him into hugs or saying things that made the boy blush. Harry thought he heard her calling him 'adorable' once in passing.

It was with no small amount of amusement that Harry noted Allenby wasn't Solieyu's only fan. Luna Lovegood often wandered around after him, never saying a word. One night, Solieyu had confided in Harry that the girl rather spooked him in a way he couldn't quite place a finger on. Laughing, Harry had patted his friend on the back and stated that it wasn't strange at all to think Lovegood odd.

The dreams continued to plague Harry, keeping him from ever getting a full night's sleep. Harry was unsure of how to interpret the dreams. Divination wasn't until his third year and, honestly, he hadn't ever bothered reading up on the subject. Seemed rather silly to him, in fact. Harry kept his strange dreams to himself. Solieyu asked him at breakfast one day about why he looked so worn out. Harry had replied that he was just sore from all the Quidditch practice lately. Solieyu hadn't seemed entirely convinced, but let the matter go, anyway.

As he made his way down towards the Great Hall, Harry couldn't help but notice that the staff was already preparing for Halloween. Several

large pumpkins had been placed about the castle, and some sketchy, gnarled trees had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, on the grounds.

The ghosts were more active than normal, too. The Bloody Baron, in particular, seemed to be living it up. So to speak.

There were two dominating things that loomed over Harry as the holiday approached, however. The first was literal - Peeves the Poltergeist had taken an interest to trailing Harry around every so often. The second was more figurative. With the chaos that had happened the previous Halloween, Harry desperately hoped that no trolls were let into the castle by shady professors with Dark Lords sticking out of the back of their heads.

"My head hurts." Harry grumbled to no one in particular as he took his normal spot at the end of the Ravenclaw table. He began piling food onto his plate, idly taking note of how far down the table Tonks was.

"That's your brain trying to comprehend its own stupidity." Said Solieyu, appearing as if out of nowhere and taking a spot across from Harry.

"Quiet, you." Harry said, grinning crookedly.

"Peeves didn't have any presents for you today, eh?"

"None at all, though he did topple over a suit of armor. I nearly got cleaved in half!" Harry spat. "Honestly, why do they let him stay here? I'll never understand it."

"I don't think they could get rid of him if they wanted to." Said Solieyu, glancing briefly at the food on the table and choosing to stick to pumpkin juice for the moment. "I believe ghosts are bound magically. It shouldn't be very much different for poltergeists."

"I suppose not." Harry said, popping a bit of bacon into his mouth. "Doesn't mean I gotta like it, though."

"Agreed. He tried putting gum in my hair a few weeks ago while I was on my way to see Madam Pomfrey." Solieyu said, gritting his teeth.

Harry winced. "With hair that long, I can only imagine what that'd do."

"Can you honestly imagine me being bald?" Solieyu asked, scowling somewhat.

"Not at all. I can imagine *Malfoy* being bald, though." Harry said.

"Another prank?"

"Possibly."

"While I don't think they're entirely unfunny, I just don't see the point to pranking Draco Malfoy so much."

"He's a git!" Declared Harry. "And he's a Slytherin, for that matter."

"So?"

"What do you mean 'so'? He's a *Sly-the-rin*!" Harry repeated, pronouncing each syllable slowly.

"I know what house he belongs to. But I know a couple of Slytherins that aren't hideous or mean-spirited."

"You lie!"

"Not unless absolutely neccessary." Stated Solieyu, sipping at his juice. "The Slytherin girls in our year aren't all bad, are they?"

"In what way? Pansy Parkinson resembles a pug and Millicent Bulstrode looks like a man in drag." Harry said, dryly.

"Oh, come now. Pansy Parkinson may be snotty, but she certainly doesn't look like a pug." Solieyu said, rolling his eyes.

"She's Malfoy's little lapdog, so I find the association fitting." Said Harry with a shrug.

The two were interrupted by the morning mail being delivered. Hedwig had nothing to bring, but still came down for a visit with Harry, who happily shared some of his breakfast with her.

Solieyu, on the other hand, got a blue envelope dropped in his lap by a tawny owl that didn't bother to land. Watching the owl leave, Solieyu smiled faintly as he picked the envelope up.

"From my mother." He explained, noticing Harry looking over.

"Ahh. What's she got to say?"

"Well, let's see..." Solieyu opened the envelope up and pulled out the letter, which was on equally blue parchment. "...She likes blue. I try not to notice so much."

"Is it written in blue ink?" Harry asked, eyes watching Hedwig flap back up and out of the Great Hall.

"Of course it isn't. You wouldn't be able to read it if it were" Solieyu said. He then went silent as his eyes scanned the letter. His brows came together at one point and, when he was finished, he slipped it back into the envelope.

"Well?" Harry prodded.

Shrugging, Solieyu replied, "It just says for me to write my grandmother. She's come down with a rather nasty case of the chicken pox."

Harry winced. "Not good for the elderly, that."

"Indeed. But she's tough, if nothing else. I'm sure she'll still be up and about, as usual, whacking people with her cane and complaining about the price of things 'these days.'"

Harry laughed. "Sounds like a ball, your grandmother."

"Indeed. She's a magnificent cook, though. As picky as she is with her ingredients, she *should* be."

"Not hungry?" Harry asked, wolfing down a bit of ham.

"I've already fed." Said Solieyu.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You haven't touched anything but your pumpkin juice, what are you talking about?"

With a vague smile, Solieyu just shrugged and got to his feet. "All in good time, Harry. We should really be going, though. Potions will begin in ten minutes. Do you really want to make Snape angry at this hour?"

Groaning, Harry replied, "I'd rather not even *look* at Snape at this hour. But if I must..."

With that, Harry stuffed another rasher of bacon into his mouth, washed it down with a large gulp of pumpkin juice, and stood up. "Should we get Tonks or not?"

"She hasn't been late so far." Solieyu said.

"Yeah... Well... Let's go, I guess." Harry said, shoulders slumping.

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"Ahh, Mr. Potter. Can you not go a single lesson without glancing at someone else's work? I believe the instructions are perfectly clear on the board. Or are you simply so bored as to not care about the state of your own potion?"

Harry glared up at Snape, who was practically hovering over his cauldron. "I'm doing *fine*." He ground out.

"Are you?" Replied Snape, dryly. "You just added the idolroot, which I clearly wrote not to add until steam begins to rise. In addition, the color should be a dull blue. Yours seems to refuse parting ways with the color yellow. Is this what passes as 'fine' work for a Ravenclaw these days...?"

Harry bit down hard on his lower lip and continued to work at a potion that he was already aware had become a failure. He might not make the proper brew, but he wasn't going to just up and stop because Snape was sniping him.

Thankfully, the Potions Master's attention was drawn away as Crabbe let out a girlish squeal from across the room. All eyes shot his way, being met by the Slytherin boy pawing at his chest. Snape let out a deep sigh under his breath and swept across the room.

"Foolish boy! You add the antennae *after* the potion reaches a boil! AFTER!" Snape growled as he banished the ruined contents of Crabbe's cauldron with the flick of his wand. "Mr. Goyle, if you'd be so kind as to get Mr. Crabbe up to Madam Pomfrey before this burns *all* the way through to his organs..."

Crabbe let out a wail as Goyle hefted him towards and out the door to the room. Harry caught the remnants of a twitch in Snape's eye as he turned and headed back toward his desk.

"If I can count on the rest of you to have *some* common sense and comprehension skills, we *may* just get through the rest of this class without someone melting their own face off!"

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The night before Halloween, Harry was making his way towards his secret tower, pondering whether or not to name the spot. He didn't want to keep calling it his 'secret tower,' as that sounded silly and dumb. But coherent thought was beyond him that night. The day has positively drained him of energy. Potions with Snape breathing down his neck, Defense with that boob of a professor, and Tonks nearly slapping him. It hadn't been a good day. Solieyu seemed to have the common sense to keep away from both of his friends and vanished early in the evening to parts unknown.

As Harry entered the tower's base and made his way up the tight, spiral staircase, a sound caught his ear. Frowning, he slowed his pace and quietly pushed the trapdoor at the top open just enough to take a peek around.

His frown deepened when he saw the source of the noise. Tonks, knees drawn up to her chest, was leaning against a wall, her head lowered.

She was sniffing.

Not bothering to hesitate, Harry opened the trapdoor up as he normally would and clambered up onto the stone floor. Tonks barely had enough time to register someone approaching before she was drawn into a tight embrace.

"...I don't know what I did. Really I don't." Harry whispered in her ear. "But please... please, Tonks... Let's stop this. I've been miserable without you... Things just aren't the same..."

Tonks sat, frozen, until finally she regained enough control to turn her head and stare at Harry.

Harry met her gaze. "Ginny Weasley means nothing to me, Tonks. She never will."

Drawing a slow breath to lessen the shudder to it, Tonks murmured, "How can you be so sure?"

Harry let himself smile faintly. "Some things a guy just knows. This is one of 'em. Trust me?"

Instead of replying, Tonks let herself lean forward into Harry's arms, closing her eyes. "I'm sorry, too. I don't know why I've been acting so stupid, Harry... It's just... One minute, I'm fine and the next, something really dumb will set me off..."

"Puberty." Harry said, making a face.

Tonks cracked an eye open. "I *beg* your pardon?"

"That's what Leon thinks it is. Puberty." Harry said, still pulling a face. "I say that there are some things best left unknown..."

"...Oh, Merlin, and I wrote Mum about this..." Tonks groaned. "I can only imagine what she might write in response..."

Harry cleared his throat, then spoke in a high-pitched voice, "Dear Nymmy, your pink bits are going through changes. Don't let men ever get near them. If you do, you're grounded forever. Love, Mummy."

"What, not a good enough impression?"

"Hey, I thought it was good!"

"Oh, come *on*!" Harry exclaimed, bottom lip jutting out. "Okay, what do *you* think she'll say, you're so smart?"

"...I think she'll tell me it's natural to be insane, that I shouldn't take it out on you guys, and to cave in Terry Boot's boots if he dares to kiss me again." Tonks said.

Harry twitched. "Yeah, who did he think he was, doing that? I mean, who does he think would even *want* kissing him?"

"Me, apparently." Tonks growled. "Stupid boys."

"Hey!"

"Except you. You're alright. And Leon, too, even if he *is* a bit weird."

"You saying I'm not weird?" Harry asked, bottom lip threatening to poke out again.

"Nope! Bit gloomy at times, but definitely not weird." Tonks said, nodding sagely as she finally moved back out of Harry's arms. He seemed rather reluctant to let go, but settled on sitting next to his friend instead.

"I think I have a right to be gloomy." Harry mumbled. "My home life is awful, I had a guy with two faces - one of which was the man who killed my parents, I might add - try to murder me last year, and I've got some... *somerennaissance dandy* for a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher!"

Tonks snorted.

Harry crossed his arms. "Well, it's true."

Tonks awwed, patting Harry on the head. "Of course it is, Harry. Of course it is."

Harry scowled. "Quit that, you'll mess up my hair!"

Tonks blinked. "It wasn't already?"

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but couldn't think of anything. So instead, he chose to simply stick his tongue out at Tonks. As hard as he could.

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"I love Halloween!" Tonks said, bouncing down the hallway the following afternoon. Harry and Solieyu were walking behind her, both silently wondering where all of the girl's energy came from.

"As long as a troll doesn't show up..." Harry muttered darkly.

"Oh, so what if one does? We've gotten away from one before." Tonks said, spinning around and walking backwards so she could face her friends.

"We lucked out." Solieyu corrected. "If the headmaster hadn't shown up, we might not be here today."

Tonks hmphed. "We would have thought of something."

"Such as?" Harry asked.

"Such as... Um... I dunno. Whack it in the grundies with its own club?"

Harry and Solieyu both stopped, raising their eyebrows at Tonks.

"Grundies'?" Solieyu asked.

"Yeah. I dunno exaaaactly what it means, but Mum used it in the letter I got today. I'll letcha both read it later. I think she hates Terry, too." Tonks said, grinning.

"Can't say as I blame her." Harry said. "He's a right prat."

"I wonder what he's doing in Ravenclaw..." Tonks pondered aloud.

"Potentially getting clubbed in the grundies." Solieyu commented in a dry tone.

Tonks and Harry took one look at each other and promptly cracked up.

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"Well, the night's going well so far." Harry commented. It was well over an hour into Hogwarts' annual Halloween party and so far, nothing bad had happened. The twins had made a pumpkin come to life right off the bat, though. It had chased Terry Boot around the Great Hall until Professor Flitwick returned it to normal. Harry insisted that he had nothing to do with it. Tonks didn't believe him.

"So far." Tonks said, scowling. "But I don't like it. Something just doesn't feel right. Does that make sense?"

"...I suppose so. I guess something *has* felt a bit off." Harry said.

"Wonder what it is. The castle feels... I dunno... Different." Tonks said, frowning. "And where the heck are all the ghosts? There aren't very many up here, considering."

The Grey Lady, who was passing by, floated around in front of Harry and Tonks. "That would be because Nearly-Headless Nick is celebrating his Death Day."

"Death Day?" Harry asked.

"Yes," said the ghost, "He invited everyone in the castle and some from other places... I went to his last party... And quite frankly, it was the pits. Nick spent almost two hours wailing about how he was robbed of life too soon and what a nitwit his executioner was..."

"I don't blame you for not wanting to go again." Harry said, raising an eyebrow. "I doubt I would, either."

"Yes, dreadful affair, Nick's parties." The Grey Lady commented. Shaking her head, she then floated off toward the staff table to speak with Professor Vector, who had been trying to get the ghost's attention.

"If Leon was around, I'd say we should go find the party's location..." Tonks muttered.

"What? Why? Didn't you hear the Lady? It's got to be boring *and* headache-inducing. Why on earth would you want to go to something like that?" Harry asked, obviously bewildered.

"Beats hanging around here and sipping pumpkin juice, doesn't it?" Tonks asked. "Besides, Lockhart looks like he's gathering a crowd. And quite frankly, I've no desire to see anything that idiot is going to try pulling off."

Harry looked over Tonks' shoulders, eyes widening.

"Damn, you're right." He scowled, setting his goblet of pumpkin juice down. "C'mon, let's get out of here!"

Tonks didn't need any further coaxing. Popping a tiny bit of a pie slice into her mouth, she and Harry made their escape from the Great Hall. Apparently, just in time. Moments after they were in the safety of the Entrance Hall, a loud '**BANG**' emanated from where they had just left. Seconds later, pink smoke came rolling in under the doors.

"...Good instincts." Harry commented, blinking.

"Naturally. I'm a woman." Tonks said, grinning. "C'mon, let's find that party. Or Leon. Did he tell *you* where he was going?"

"Well," Harry began, idly noting that people were filing out of the Great Hall, coughing and waving their hands around. "He only said not to expect him to be around tonight. As usual, he's decided to act mysterious."

"That figures. Well, maybe we can make a night of it. We'll hunt down Leon and drag his butt to Nick's party-of-doom." Tonks said, resting her hands on her hips and smirking.

"He's in the library." Came a sudden voice from behind the two.

Harry and Tonks jumped, yelping, and turned to face Luna Lovegood, whose hair was a lovely shade of light-red for some reason.

"...Uh, Luna?" Tonks asked. "What happened to your hair?"

"Oh, Professor Lockhart was trying to summon a Floating Glumblebee. But I don't think he did everything right..." Said the girl in her lazy voice. "Everybody's hair is a shade of red... Look."

Sure enough, those that had escaped from the Great Hall had hair in varying degrees of red. A few Hufflepuffs had opened the front doors to the school to try and air the area out. One had blood-red hair, the other had hair so pink it could have glowed in the dark. As he turned around, the Ravenclaw duo saw that the mustache he was growing had also turned bright pink.

"...Hey, Nymmy. Do you think that would've messed with *our* hair? I mean... we're a bit better at color regulation than everyone else, wouldn't you say?" Harry asked, staring at the neon mustache.

"I dunno. Want to go ask that dingbat if he could summong a Floating Whatsit for us, too?" Tonks asked.

"...Nah. My luck, he'd burn all of my clothing away."

"And that would be bad?" Tonks asked. "I'm sure the twins would find it a laugh riot."

"Oh, shut up. C'mon, let's go to the library."

"Fine, fine. Oh, and don't call me Nymmy, you jerk." Tonks said, lightly slugging Harry on the arm. The two then set off for the main stairway, climbing at a leisurely pace. The evening had just started and neither was in that big a hurry.

"Wonder how Luna knew where he was..." Tonks wondered aloud.

"Probably stalked him there before she came down to the party..." Harry said.

"Wouldn't surprise me." Tonks said, nodding slowly.

"...Hey, Tonks."

"What?"

"Let's try turning our hair pink before we get there."

"Why?"

"Well, for one thing, he'd never expect it. Two, it'd be the perfect icebreaker in case he's off being gloomy or something..." Harry said, ticking off things on his fingers. "Three..."

"Three..." Tonks echoed, glancing aside with raised eyebrows.

"Three... I still say you look kind of cute with pink hair."

"Really?"

"Nah, you looked hideous. OWW!"

Tonks stomped up to the third floor ahead of Harry, who was rubbing his left arm. Pouting, he muttered, "Gotta stop doing dumb things like that." Then louder, he called out, "Aw, come on, Nymmy! I was just kidding! You *a/ways* look cute!"

And with that, Harry raced up the stairs to try to catch up to his best friend.

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Author's Notes: I'm sorry for the GLARING Zim reference. I just couldn't stop myself! It seemed like something the little loony would cry out at random. Remember, she's still very much a carefree little girl at this point. ...Not that she seems to get much better. But I think a few years of reality sobers her up a little bit. What do you guys think? I like Luna. She's good for lightening a situation. Also, sorry for the random jump to Halloween. I didn't make a calendar for this like I did with book 1. So I kinda got lost on how much time I claimed passed. Urk. But that's the kinda stuff a beta would catch and...well...xx;

Sorry for taking so long. Getting my new computer has given me a few new doohickeys to play around with. I can game MUCH better...even when my hands are aching at me not to.

Next time, it's Halloween Part 2! I've got to re-read a bit of the book before I really get into things any further. Gotta take notes on when stuff happens and to WHO.

I was pondering just writing one night of Halloween, but that would have taken another month or something. And this thing took way too long as is to crank out. Apologies as usual.

Expect a wait of roughly the same time for the next one. I do have a valid excuse this time, though. Its name is Pokemon Emerald and it is addictive. Mmm. Shiny green something-or-otherrrr...

Oh, and I hope everyone liked the wee little bit of fluff I threw in. Gotta have cute scenes every so often, yesno? Until next time, folks!

Chapter 8 – Trick or Treat, Part 2

"So were the witches real or not?" Harry asked.

"Oh, definitely real. I hear their ghosts still hang around the Hill, too." Said Tonks, idly twirling a strand of long, blue hair around her finger.

"Remind me never to go there."

"Noted."

Harry and Tonks weren't anywhere near the library. They had gone up to fetch Solieyu, but he hadn't been there. When they reached the main stairway again, they saw traces of pink smoke sifting out from the Great Hall and decided it was in their best interest to not return. And so, they had finally decided to simply search the castle. After all, Solieyu had to be *somewhere* in its walls, didn't he?

Since they were on the fourth floor, Tonks suggested they search all the way down first, then go back up. It would be faster that way. And if, for some reason, it wasn't, it still gave them time to just be by themselves. Anywhere was better than in the Pink Hall with Lockhart.

Along the way, Harry had decided to strike up a conversation regarding something he had been reading about. Namely, the Pendle Hill witches. Tonks seemed to know much more on the subject, which Harry wasn't really surprised about. Despite how she acted, the girl could definitely impress him at times with what she knew. Of course, a great deal of this knowledge seemed to be about random and pointless things... But knowledge it was, no less.

"Hey Tonks?"

"Yeah?"

"We have to name the Tower."

Tonks blinked. "It already has one, Harry. It's called Ra-ven-claw Tower."

Harry scowled as she drew each syllable out, as if he were a little boy or something. "Not *that* Tower! *OUR* Tower! It seems stupid to call it 'our secret Tower,' so I thought we should name it. But I'm terrible at things like that, apparently. Any thoughts?"

"Not a one." Tonks stated. "But I'll give it some thought."

"...No trolls so far. We must be in luck."

"Don't jinx it." Tonks laughed. "The night isn't over yet."

"No, but it's slowly getting there." Harry said, crossing his arms and nodding solemnly. "Something could still happen."

"Like what?" Tonks asked.

Rounding a corner, Harry had his mouth open to reply, but fell silent. Tonks, who had kept her eyes on him, stopped a few steps ahead of him.

"Like that." Harry said, nodding once.

Tonks turned around, following Harry's gaze. She gaped at what she saw. Mrs. Norris, Argus Filch's cat and general nuisance, was strung up to a torch on the wall. Her body seemed as stiff as a board. But she wasn't alone. It wasn't hard to tell whose body was laying nearby, even though the person was in a prone position. In addition, a message was written on the wall in what appeared to be blood. Harry paid this little mind, however. He knew who was on the ground.

Harry took off in a sprint, Tonks catching up quickly, as he rushed to Fred Weasley's side, skidding to a halt as he dropped to his knees.

"Fred! Oi, Fred, what's..." Harry began, turning the twin over. The look on Fred's face, however, was frozen in confusion. Nearby, a small box - filled with round devices with the lettering "HH" on them - had been overturned. It was almost as if someone had knocked him out with a *Petrificus* spell. Harry tried using *Finite* on him, but his petrified state wouldn't revert.

"Remind me to keep my big mouth shut in the future." Harry whispered. "Go get someone, Tonks. Dumbledore should still be in the Great Hall..."

"Right..." Tonks said, turning and rushing back up the corridor.

Harry carefully set Fred down and walked over to the box of round objects. Picking one up, he inspected it closely to see if it might have had anything to do with the current situation. But it seemed to be little more than one of the twins' random pranks. It was quite shiny, almost to the point of being reflective and, on the back of it, the words "Halloween Haunts" were written. Harry wasn't sure what they did, but he was almost positive that they weren't meant to petrify a person.

A number of minutes later, Tonks returned. With her were Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall, along with George Weasley and Argus Filch. Harry wasn't thrilled to see the cranky caretaker, but as it was his cat hanging from the torch, he figured that he couldn't do anything about it.

"What, exactly, has happened here?" Asked Dumbledore as he surveyed the scene.

"I don't know..." Harry said. "We were looking for Leon and... well, we just found them like this..."

"Indeed?" Dumbledore said, walking over and inspecting Mrs. Norris closer. Filch was right beside him, eyes wide as he got a good look at his cat.

"He's killed her..." He gruffed out a second later, turning his head and staring down at the petrified form of Fred Weasley. "I always knew someone would wind up dead because of them!"

"Of course he didn't kill her!" George replied, sounding cross. "Fred's the same way your stupid cat is, isn't he?"

"Probably knew it was better to do himself in than wait for *ME*!" Filch growled.

"Calm yourself, Argus." Said Dumbledore, putting a hand on the enraged man's shoulder.

"What are those in the box, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked, stepping forward.

"These? Dunno. George, you have any idea what Fred was doing?" Harry asked, looking up.

George sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah... He was going through the school, rigging up the Halloween Haunts. Around midnight, they would've sent cold winds, fireworks, and wailing moans through the whole school. Said he was going to start from Gryffindor Tower and work his way down..."

McGonagall shot her student an exasperated look, but said nothing.

"Looks like he didn't get a chance to finish. Wonder what he looks so confused about." Harry wondered aloud, glancing down at the odd expression on the petrified Weasley's face.

"Dunno. Maybe it had something to do with *that*." George said, motioning towards the bloody writing.

Dumbledore seemed to have already noticed, but McGonagall went a few shades paler than she had been. Filch was too busy trying to get Mrs. Norris' tail from around the torch.

"Albus, that's..." McGonagall began.

"Yes." Was all Dumbledore said in reply. Despite his outwardly calm appearance, there was no mistaking the strange tone of his voice. Something was definitely wrong here. Harry had a feeling that Dumbledore and McGonagall knew exactly what had happened to Fred and the cat. The real question was why weren't they saying it...?

"Mr. Weasley, if you would be so kind as to collect your brother and take him to the hospital wing. I believe Minerva and I need to find Pomona and ask her about the Mandrakes she's growing..." Said the headmaster, turning and giving McGonagall a pointed look over his

spectacles. Glancing over Dumbledore's shoulder as George levitated his brother into the air, McGonagall nodded.

Before leaving, Dumbledore pulled his wand, murmured an incantation that Harry couldn't catch, and freed Mrs. Norris' tail. "Argus, if you would bring her to Poppy, as well...?"

Filch nodded as he slumped off up the hall, cradling the cat in his arms and murmuring soothing things to her.

George looked over his shoulder at Harry and called back, "Do us a favor and round those things up, would you? Wouldn't want them to fall into anyone's hands. Be a bit of a mess if they all got loose at once."

Harry nodded. He wasn't sure how George could act so calm, considering his brother had been petrified by an unknown assailant. He heard the redhead muttering things in Fred's general direction as the two headed off, but...

"That all went by quickly, didn't it?" Tonks asked, causing Harry to jump. He had forgotten that she was still there.

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Hogwarts wasn't the place to be if you had a secret. Between loose lips and nosy portraits, talk spread like wildfire. George had been threatening anyone who even dared breathe his brother's name with a punishment from The List. Filch was yelling at random students as he shuffled aimlessly through the halls.

The morning after Halloween, Dumbledore had made an announcement regarding Fred and Mrs. Norris. His explanation was that a prank backfired and landed the two in the hospital wing. With a handful of the already-panted Haunts having gone off at midnight as planned, this seemed almost like a normal explanation. Harry stole a glance at George during this. While the redhead's face remained emotionless, he was gripping the Gryffindor table so hard that his knuckles were white. Clearly, he didn't care for the headmaster's version of events any more than Harry did.

Unfortunately, other students had wandered across the writing on the wall before it had been vanished. This led to even more holes in the headmaster's story. But the general majority of the students believed him - the man *did* give off an air of confidence and truth, even when he was lying through his teeth.

Figuring the headmaster simply didn't want to needlessly worry anyone, Harry didn't comment on the situation. He *did*, however, take note of how very worn-out Professor Sprout looked that morning. Her hair, which was never tame in any sense of the word, was extra-frazzled. She also had deep bags under her eyes. She must have been up later than everyone else. Must have had something to do with those awful Mandragora plants that Harry's group had been forced to deal with in Herbology.

It was only natural, though. Mandrakes were well-known to reverse the effects of petrification. The real problem was the source. What would both take out Fred Weasley, who had been armed to the teeth with pranks at the time and was normally very aware of his surroundings, as well as write something in blood on the wall?

It was all very annoying to Harry. Another mystery was beginning to unfold in front of him. And, as usual, he was left with too many pieces of the puzzle that just didn't seem to fit anywhere.

Solieyu had turned up that morning, as well. If Professor Sprout looked bad, Solieyu looked worse. His hair was hanging free and his eyes were almost red, they were so bloodshot. He seemed paler than usual, which was really saying something. And he seemed to be shaking slightly, something that Harry couldn't remember seeing him ever do before.

"Bad night?" He asked a few minutes after his friend had taken his usual spot.

"You have no idea." Breathed Solieyu, propping his elbows on the table and resting his head in his hands. "It's *really* bright in here this morning..."

"Mm. You look like hell. What happened?" Harry said, pushing his plate of food aside.

"Did something happen last night?" Asked Solieyu, pointedly avoiding Harry's question.

"Yeah. You've managed to avoid the rumor mill so far?"

Solieyu nodded slightly. "I've tried keeping away from noisy places. I was... sick last night, and I'm taking the brunt of its effects this morning."

"Sick, huh?" Asked Harry in a tone of blatant disbelief.

"Yes. Sick." Solieyu said, making a point of clearly stating the word. One of his eyes was visible through his fingers, issuing an outright glare towards Harry.

Leaning forward, Harry whispered, "Bigger things are going on than that. Listen, Fred and Mrs. Norris were attacked last night. They're both in the hospital wing, petrified. Where we found them, there was bloody writing on the wall that spoke of a 'chamber of secrets' and warned 'enemies of the heir' to beware."

"The ruddy hell does that mean?" Solieyu asked in a tired voice.

Harry raised an eyebrow. It wasn't like his friend to swear. Even so minorly. "No idea. I know you... can tell... certain things..." He said, choosing his words carefully. Solieyu was obviously in a testy mood. "You didn't happen to pick up on anything strange last night, did you?"

"I felt *something*." Replied Solieyu a few moments later. "It was like the troll last year, only..."

"Only...?"

"Only it felt much, much worse. Darker, somehow, if that makes any sense. If I had to sum up how it felt in one word, I'd use 'polluted'... Whatever I sensed, it was... *foul* somehow." Solieyu explained.

"Lovely. Something worse than a troll." Harry scowled. He took up a position much like his friend's, closing his eyes and trying to work out just what the devil was happening in the school *this* time.

"Wotcher." Whispered a voice from just above his air a few minutes later. Harry jumped, nearly falling over backwards. Turning, he glared at Tonks, who had finally decided to come down and eat. She enjoyed sleeping as late as she could get away with and seemed to alternate between wanting to eat as soon as possible and sleeping in. It was annoying, but Harry had quickly adjusted to her bizarre schedule, knowing automatically when not to wait for her.

"And a good morning to you too." Harry grumbled, sitting up straight. "Have a good lay-in, did you?"

"I did. And what's got your buttons, eh?" Tonks asked, snaking her arms out to collect a healthy dose of food.

"Dumbledore seems keen on covering up what happened." Harry said. "And Leon over here has a hangover and senses something evil."

Tonks looked between the staff table, Solieyu, and Harry before speaking. "Come again?"

Harry launched into an explanation of the morning's events so far. When he was through, Tonks looked as annoyed as Harry felt.

"Should we go checking the faculty's hair for second faces, then?" Asked the girl around a mouthful of bacon.

"I don't think Voldemort's behind it this time." Harry said, idly taking note of the faint winces the people around him made. Lowering his voice, he continued, "Besides, why would a teacher attack Mrs. Norris and Fred? And then leave evidence behind? I only wish there was a way to trace who or what that blood belonged to. It had to come from somewhere, didn't it!"

"Another mystery for our resident detective." Tonks said, grinning.

"Oh, shut up, Nymmy."

"Oi!"

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"He's *WHAT!*"

"Yeah, that was my first reaction, too."

Harry gaped at Tonks. It was almost a week after Halloween and the news that Professor Lockhart was going to be establishing a Dueling Club was making the rounds.

"You've got to be kidding. If he tries dueling *anyone*, half the student body will be turned to mush..." Harry groaned, setting aside a book on werewolves and shaking his head.

Tonks flopped down on the chair's arm, stretching. She had just gotten back from a late dinner (she had to finish a Potions essay) and had brought the hideous news with her. "I know. ...Want to go watch?"

"Sure, why not?" Harry answered with a roll of his eyes. "After all, I'm sure we can protect ourselves from whatever he might try. And on the bright side, whoever he duels against is sure to make a right arse of himself."

"Heyyy... What if it's *Snape*?" Tonks said, grinning.

"Ohh... *Ohh*, come on, Tonks. There's no justice in the world that sweet..." Harry said. Though he wasn't grinning back, there was a twinkle in his eyes.

"Hey, we can dream, can't we? It's *Lockhart*, Harry! Who *else* would he pick? He isn't going to pick on Flitwick, is he? He'd want to attempt to show off against the best in the school."

"And that's *Snape*?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well... I don't know. But I'd wager this year's Christmas presents on it. I mean... It's *Snape*. Doesn't he *look* like he could hex you into oblivion before you even drew your wand?"

"He wasn't doing so bloody good last year." Harry scowled, thinking back to the fight against Quirrell.

"...Point. ...I still wonder if he was a Death Eater, though. Why else would he freak out over Voldemort's face?"

"Well it isn't exactly normal to see a guy with two faces. But yeah, Snape seems much tougher than that. Don't think there's any real way to find out, though. I know I'm certainly not going to come out and ask him."

Tonks snorted. "Yeah, I bet he'd show you whether or not he really *is* a good duelist if you pulled a stunt like that."

"I'll leave him to Lockhart, thanks." Harry said, picking his book up again. "Care to curl up and read with me?"

"Don't have any books handy." Tonks pointed out.

"So read over my shoulder... or... from beside my shoulder. Or... uhm... well, you know what I mean, blast it all." Harry said, flushing slightly.

"Yes, yes, I know what you mean." Tonks said, biting back a giggle. "Go on, then. Open it back up."

Harry did so, feeling Tonks shift over so that she was leaning against his left side. It made it slightly awkward to hold the big book up at an angle that the two of them could read it at... But Harry weighed the options and found that he really didn't mind the awkwardness.

And besides, the last time he had tried working something different out, Tonks had promptly hopped on his lap with her legs dangling over the arms of the chair, telling him to let *her* hold the book. She wasn't able to properly finish the sentence before she started laughing. Apparently, Harry had lit up like a Christmas tree and wasn't able to form a coherent sentence. Thankfully, Harry had blocked out most of the memory. It had been wholly embarrassing, after all. Nice, in a strange sort of way, but embarrassing nonetheless.

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"I can't keep doing this. I can't. It hurts too much."

"You're a strong boy. Your emotions are j--"

"No, I mean physically. It hurts too much *physically*. For the last twenty hours or so, my body's been in more pain than I care to admit."

"Hm? Describe the pain for me."

"There's no proper way for it, I'm afraid."

With a weak laugh, Solieyu leaned back against the closed door to Madam Pomfrey's office. The matron of the school's hospital was sitting behind her desk, thumbing through a handful of books, scanning their pages at a frightening pace.

"Well," She finally began, looking up at the boy through her eyelashes. "You can't say I didn't warn you it would happen, dear."

"I know. And I'm sorry." Solieyu murmured, staggering forward into a chair on his side of the desk. "I just thought... I had gotten strong enough to overpower it."

"Tch. There's no doing that, I'm afraid. Your condition would only get worse. And you know what would happen if it got into the danger zone..." Said the nurse.

Solieyu winced. Hard. "Yes. I can't let that happen, but... Damn it all, I wish there was some other way!"

Madam Pomfrey ignored Solieyu's outburst and offered him a wan smile. "So do all who get inflicted with such maladies. You aren't the first, and I'm sure you won't be the last, that I see pass under my care. And I wish I could offer you more hope... Or better yet, a cure."

Sighing, Solieyu ran a hand back through his hair. "I know... And I'm grateful for the care you *have* provided. It's just... It's hard keeping up appearances sometimes. And..."

"And?"

"I think someone knows."

The nurse's eyes sharpened as she focused on the boy in front of her.
"...Who?"

"Harry. Harry Potter."

Madam Pomfrey scowled. "Ah, yes. Him. The only boy other than you I seem to see regularly. FIVE times last year. Five! And he's already come in once so far this year... I honestly wish Severus would TEACH you children rather than just giving you instructions and leaving you to your own devices!"

Solieyu offered a dry chuckle to the nurse's fury.

Clearing her throat, Madam Pomfrey then continued, "So... You think he knows? How so?"

"He asks me things. I've done too many... unusual things... around him. I would have been much better off if we hadn't have had to deal with that troll last year. That gave away quite a bit on its own." Solieyu explained. "I've caught him trying to follow me at times, though he's stopped ever since I asked him to wait until I was ready..."

"So he suspected, confronted you, and... you gave him proof that his suspicions were correct?"

"...Well, when you put it like that..."

Shaking her head, Madam Pomfrey stood and began closing and filing the books on her desk. It was getting late, after all. "Well, dear, I'm afraid there's not much to do about it, then. As troublesome as Harry is, he's trustworthy. Albus seems to think so, anyway."

"Yeah... He's a pretty nice guy. He didn't even seem to flinch when I told him to wait for me to say something... It's like..."

"Like he doesn't care what you are?"

Looking up, Solieyu nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, like he doesn't care. ...I'm still not sure I trust him on that, though. So far, only adults have given me pity."

"It's not pity. Not here." Corrected the nurse. "You should know that by now."

"Yes. I'm sorry. I meant... adults outside of Hogwarts. Friends of my mother, mostly. They... Well, they don't come out and say it - that would be too rude. But I can see it in their eyes. I can feel it, almost. Acute senses aren't fun to have most of the time."

Finishing her task, Madam Pomfrey walked off into her storeroom. "Most gifts aren't, you'll find. Always some downside to them, no matter how great or little."

"I suppose so." Said the boy, getting shakily to his feet as well. "Are you sure there isn't any other way?"

An apologetic tone to her voice, Madam Pomfrey replied, "I'm afraid not. I know you hate it. I'm not thrilled with it, either."

Walking back out, the nurse handed out a vial of red liquid to the boy. "But it's all that can be done."

Solieyu sighed quietly, taking the vial and holding it to eye's level. "For now."

Smiling sadly, Madam Pomfrey nodded, placing a hand on Solieyu's shoulder. "For now." She agreed.

Uncorking the top, Solieyu took one last look at the contents, squeezed his eyes closed, and forced himself to drink them in one quick gulp.

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Author's Notes: Aha! First strike! Bet no one saw me taking out one of the twins, did they? Especially this early. Mrs. Norris is evil, and I like writing a grumpy Filch, so she's still victim 2. And yes, I do have a reason for why Fred didn't get killed by the basilisk. All will be revealed at the end. Sorry about taking so long. My sleep schedule has been...atrocious. And I've kinda been sick this week. I must've eaten something LAST weekend that hated me, 'cause I've been feeling totally blech ever since. My sister's birthday is the 22nd, so

that's also had me running around a bit. Ach. So much has delayed this two-parter.

But things are FINALLY in motion! And the DUELING CLUB is next chapter! My favorite part of both book AND movie. I'm gonna have some fun with it, since Ravenclaw-Harry is much more booksmart than Gryffindor-Harry. I like Harry using his brains.

And we get our complimentary Honks moment! Yeah, I COULD have written about the lap moment in flashback... but where's the fun in that? Use your imagination to picture how poor, poor Harry looked. Aww, Tonks likes teasing the poor guy.

And Hangover-Leon! Anyone care to wager a guess on why HE'S feeling all haggard this chapter?

Aside from the Dueling Club, next chapter will also have the explanation of what the Chamber is. I'm pondering changing the place up a bit. What do you guys think? I'm already changing the victims list, the bit with Riddle, the WHOLE basilisk fight, what the Sorting Hat will spit out, etc. Might as WELL make the place look different, huh? I didn't care for the movie's version, anyway.

And why is it Secrets? Why is that word a plural? What did Salazar keep in there? I figure Half-Blood Prince will answer a few of those. I'm hoping it will, anyway. I can't help but wonder if there's OTHER creatures kept there. Me, I want to see a Stolas appear. Things are creepy as hell, if ya ask me. In any case, I'll stop blathering now and get on with writing something relevant. Chapter 9, here I come.

(Oh, and I hope no one minded the Leon bit finishing the chapter out. A bit of filler, but I needed to pad this one to flesh it out more. Call it character development, since I never really say what the hell the poor guy's feeling or doing much.)

Chapter 9 – Dueling with the Unknown

Damn!" Harry cried, leaping to one side and rolling into an upright position. From there, he swung his wand arm around, aimed at Malfoy, and cried, "*Confundo!*"

Malfoy smirked, zigzagging his wand in front of him and throwing up a shield spell. After Harry's spell dissipated, the blonde rushed towards Harry, sending out a blasting curse.

Harry ducked, but quickly realized his mistake. With Malfoy rushing him, this left Harry wide open to attack. So he did the only thing he could. Slamming the tip of his wand into the floor, Harry growled, "*Umbra Subsisto!*"

The shadow coming off of his wand shot out towards Malfoy, who only realized what was happening a fraction of a second too late. The wand's shadow had connected with his own which had, in turn, rendered him immobile.

Panting heavily, Harry shot the Slytherin a lopsided grin. "Can't do anything to me now, can you?"

"You can't hold the spell forever, Potter!" Spat Malfoy. "That spell drains the user's energy too fast! And once you've been weakened enough, the spell will break and so will *you!*"

"Big words, Malfoy. But I haven't seen anything to back the claims up. You're actually pretty slow. I suppose it all comes from being waited on hand and foot. I'm amazed you aren't as fat as your goon squad over there, actually. Did Mummy pay a mediwitch to remove the fat from your body?" Harry taunted.

Malfoy gritted his teeth in a rage, unable to move to retaliate.

Unfortunately, Malfoy had been right about the spell. Harry could already feel its effects. It was meant to halt a target so someone else could properly deal with it. It also wasn't meant to be used on humans. It was an old hunting spell that Harry had found in one of his books. Harry wasn't even sure it would work against other wizards. But,

while it drained his energy, it also allowed him to catch his breath. Despite his taunts, Malfoy proved to be surprisingly nimble.

It also let him think. And that was what he most needed to do.

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"Harry..."

"Nn... go 'way."

"*Haaaarrryyyyy...*"

"Bugger off...m'sleep."

"Get your lazy arse outta bed, Harry!"

And so it came to be that Harry was forced from a very nice dream by Tonks. He found himself on the floor in a tangle of bedding. Tonks, still in her pajamas, was glaring down at him.

"Mornin' to you too, Nymmy." Harry grumbled.

"Oh, be quiet. Look, we're gonna be late for breakfast if you don't get a move on! The Dueling Club is gonna be tonight, and rumor has it they're already starting to plan for stuff. I wanna be there if Lockhart blows himself up or something" Tonks stated.

"I'm moving, I'm moving. Get outta here. M'not changing in front of you." Harry scowled, removing himself from his bedsheets and rubbing his lower back. "Good thing I'm sturdier than I look... Ice water on my face would've sufficed, Tonks."

"Yeah, but it wouldn't have been as amusing. Need a hand up?"

"Breakfast in bed would be nicer, but... I suppose a hand up will have to do."

Tonks started around the bed from her spot on the opposite side. But as she drew near, something happened that Harry couldn't remember happening before.

Tonks tripped.

And, as he hadn't gotten back to his feet yet, Harry was unfortunate enough to become a makeshift airbag for her to land on.

It just so happened that Solieyu chose that particular moment to return to the dorm room, rubbing his head and muttering about foul-tasting potions. When he entered, he heard a bunch of odd noises coming from one side of Harry's bed, which seemed to have been hit by a small whirlwind of some form. Raising an eyebrow and ignoring the throbbing pain in his head for the moment, Solieyu cautiously walked further into the room.

It was the first time that either Tonks or Harry had ever heard him laugh so hard.

Both Ravenclaws had froze the moment Tonks fell on Harry, both of them blushing. As per usual, Harry had lit up like a Christmas tree and began stuttering again, asking if Tonks was alright. For her part, Tonks was just trying to get back up without falling over again or making the situation worse. But, of course, the situation made *itself* worse as Solieyu entered and found them practically on top of one another, still in their pajamas.

Once he had helped extract Tonks and got Harry upright, Solieyu promptly asked, with as straight an expression as he could force, what on earth he had walked in on. This led Harry to stare down at the floor while Tonks shuffled her feet and explained what had been going on to their friend.

Once she was finished, Solieyu was chuckling again and shaking his head.

"Get out of here and down to breakfast. Both of you. I've got an awful headache and all this laughing only made it worse... I'm going to take a nap, I think..." Said the long-haired boy.

"Yeah, alright. Harry, I'll meet you down in the common room, alright?" Tonks said, glancing aside at Harry, who nodded a reply. She then got up and, carefully, made her way from the room.

Once she was gone, Harry raised his head, only to find Solieyu staring at him, looking highly amused. "Is there anything you two aren't telling me?" He asked.

Harry threw a pillow at him.

Solieyu, after flinging the pillow back, promptly got into his own bed and stretched out. But after Harry had finished changing and was about to leave, he could've sworn hearing the other boy mutter something that contained the word 'soft.'

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The day passed by in a surprisingly-quick manner. But as the day progressed, something was visibly bothering Harry. Malfoy kept shooting him looks that were somehow more pompous than the usual lot. Given what was being set up for that evening, Harry had a pretty good idea of what to expect. Somehow, in some form or another, he was going to be facing off against the blonde. Facing him in what was, for all intents and purposes, a proper dueling arena.

Nervous though he was, Harry couldn't help but feel something swell deep within himself. It was a chance to loose all that had been pent up inside of him since the two had first crossed paths. Amongst other things. If there was anything that Harry needed at that point in time, it was an outlet for all the frustration he had been experiencing. His 'home' life, his lovable, if somewhat bizarre, selection of friends, his parents' murderer facing him the previous year, a vindictive arse of a Potions Master...

And poor, stupid Malfoy was going to be the outlet? Harry felt sorry for the boy, as he felt that Malfoy was the type to buy his way through life. The best the Slytherin could do would be to throw some low-class Dark Arts spells at him. And he had done quite a bit of reading on *that* field of magic since being introduced to the wizarding world. Harry had read up on plenty of counterspells, shields, and the like, as well. But all the theory in the world wouldn't help on a practical application. Once the duel started, it was a think-on-your-feet scenario.

Harry wasn't worried, per se. After all, he *had* defeated the dregs of Voldemort a handful of months prior. It was more that he'd be

watched by the whole of the school, faculty included, that bugged Harry. He didn't like groups. He preferred solitude and quiet. If he could effectively get away with it, he would've been perfectly happy with living a pacifistic lifestyle. So, of course, fate had thrown a monkey wrench into his plans. Fate had a way of doing that to him.

Still, something deep inside of him was sounding off an array of alarms. Whatever was going to happen that night wasn't going to be normal...In any sense of the word.

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"Damn. I owe you five galleons." Harry scowled, watching as Professor Snape stepped into the dueling arena that had been set up in the Great Hall. Harry likened it to an extended sumo ring that he had seen in a picture book once. Only this ring had an invisible barrier that kept spells from flying off into the crowd and castle.

Tonks giggled, commandeering one of Harry's arms as she leaned in to whisper, "I toooold yooooou. No justice in the world that sweet, huh?"

"So I was wrong. Once." Harry sniffed, turning his nose up. This caused Tonks to giggle again.

Lockhart didn't seem phased by the excited murmurs that had erupted through the gathered student body. Egotistic as ever, the Defense Professor thought they were obviously talking about *him*. He was right, in a way. Most of the students were busy discussing what kind of spell Snape was planning to use to deposit the smarmy man firmly on his backside. So strong was the general male opinion of Lockhart, even Gryffindors and Slytherins were talking quietly with each other. Most likely to place bets.

Of course, there was always the worried-looking mob of girls looking from Snape to Lockhart. The Defense Professor's fanclub members were few and far between, however. Despite this, Lockhart grinned all around him before speaking.

"Now then! Can everybody...see me? Can you all hear me? You there, off in the back. No need to be shyyy... Come now, step on

forward! That's the way! Well, as I'm sure you've all noticed by now, Professor Snape has volunteered to help me with my little demonstration." Said the man, somehow managing to speak *and* grin at the same time.

"Snape volunteered? Fat chance. I say Dumbledore *made* him. Probably told him it'd be good for him to exercise more or something." Tonks whispered, causing Harry to bite back a grin of his own.

"Don't worry, you'll get your Potions Master back in one piece!" Continued Lockhart, ignoring the narrowing of Snape's eyes and the obvious, seething hiss of breath being exhaled. "First, I've decided to show you all how to properly disarm someone..."

"Expelliarmus." Harry mumbled a few seconds before Lockhart himself announced the spell name.

"Been studying?" Asked Tonks.

"Quite. I just have this feeling I'm going to be fighting Malfoy in here tonight" Harry grumped. "I just th--**WOW**, that looked painful!"

Harry's exclamation wasn't the only one to go up as Snape smoothly managed to not only disarm Lockhart, but also throw the man back and onto his hind end. Lockhart actually bounced slightly when he landed.

For quite possibly the first time ever, Harry felt like saying something good about Severus Snape. It was very surreal.

"Snape didn't even look like he was *trying*!" Tonks said, bouncing slightly.

"Yeah. It was pretty good." Harry agreed. "Coulda used that kind of help against Quirrellmort, but... Whatever. Snape putting the Golden Dandy in his place almost makes up for his utter uselessness back then."

Tonks rolled her eyes.

Harry was about to say something else, but it was then he heard his name get called. By Lockhart. To get into the ring and duel.

"Damn, I hate being right." Muttered Harry under his breath. Tonks disengaged from his arm and patted him on the back as he walked towards Lockhart. Glancing aside as he went, Harry saw Snape plucking Malfoy out of a group of Slytherin boys.

"I *really* hate being right." He scowled.

"What was that, Harry?" Lockhart asked, smiling jovially down at him.

"Nothing, sir." Harry replied, forcing his tone to be as polite as possible. "What am I supposed to do here? Just duel with him?"

"Yes, I thought the students could benefit more from seeing some of their own duel than watching us..." Said Lockhart. Harry felt that Lockhart needed to limp off and magic some sort of healing charm at his butt, but kept his mouth shut on the matter.

"Anything goes?" Harry asked, locking eyes with Malfoy.

Chuckling, Lockhart slapped Harry on the back and declared, "Use anything you'd like as long as it isn't illegal. Though I doubt I have to worry about that from a pair of second years, now do I?"

"Yeah." Harry gritted out.

"Well, off you go to it, then! Give us a good showing!" Lockhart cried, hobbling out of the ring as quickly as he could.

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A few quick, furious spells to start the battle and that had been it. The two fought like battle-hardened enemies that wanted nothing more than to see the other laying face down. Lockhart attempted to stop the duel at one point, but a rogue spell from Malfoy had set one of his pantlegs on fire.

"Getting tired?" Malfoy asked, an almost purring tone to his voice.

"Never felt better." Harry lied, smiling pleasantly at the other boy. This only served to anger the Slytherin, however. It was all quite amusing. And if Harry hadn't been feeling so utterly run-down, he would have laughed at how hard Malfoy was struggling against the spell.

Harry had only been kneeling for five minutes, but it felt like an eternity. His limbs were starting to throb, they were in so much pain. But if there was one thing Harry was familiar with, it was pain. He had endured so much worse at the Dursleys. The numerous beatings they had given him over the years made the current, spell-induced agony seem like a pinprick. Dudley and his gang nearly breaking his nose when he was five? Nothing. Vernon nearly breaking his neck after shoving him down the stairs? Nothing. Being locked outside in the frigid, winter weather at Christmastime? Nothing.

As his eyes unfocused and Harry began taking in all of the memories he had tried to keep locked again, something glinted behind his glasses. Malfoy was completely caught offguard when Harry suddenly released the shadow-hold and send a small barrage of random spells his way. He got caught in the side by a jelly-legs spell and was sent wobbling to and fro like a drunkard. This allowed Harry to barrel into the blonde like a freight train, sending him tumbling to the ground.

From the sidelines, Tonks noticed the change and, seeing that Harry wasn't acting normal, called out, "Harry! **Bedsheets!**"

Harry's train derailed. Which was unfortunate, since a moment later, one of Malfoy's slicing curses plowed into his right shoulder. Harry let out a short cry and clamped a hand to his bleeding shoulder, glaring at the Slytherin, who had reversed the effects of the jelly-legs spell and had since gotten to his feet.

"Pay attention, Potty. Don't want to fall to pieces on me, would you?" Taunted Malfoy, smiling in an entirely patronizing way.

Both stood silent, unmoving, save for the hitched breath coming from Harry. Then, almost as one, the next volley of spells was launched.

"**LACER!**" Cried Malfoy.

"*INVIDIA EXIMO!*" Roared Harry.

Harry's spell sliced through the second set of slicing curses and struck Malfoy dead in the chest. The spell, fueled by anger, kicked Malfoy's body back and into the magical barrier protecting the dueling arena.

But Malfoy was quick to his feet, though his breathing looked incredibly labored to Harry at that point. With a strange set of movements, Malfoy growled out, "*Serpensortia!*"

A huge cobra shot from the tip of Malfoy's wand, landing in the arena somewhere between the two of them. A gasp was sent up from the crowd. Some of the girls closest to the ring cried out.

The snake slithered forward, testing the air with its tongue. Its head bobbed back and forth as if taking its surroundings in. And then, slowly, it rose up and locked eyes with Harry. Its mouth opened again and, in an act that struck Harry in a very sort of *deja-vu* way, SPOKE to him.

"*:Who are you? Where am I? Answer.*"

Harry blinked down at the snake, briefly wondering if he had lost enough blood from the slicing curse to be hallucinating. His hesitation caused the cobra to lurch forward, hissing (which translated to cursing as Harry heard it) violently. Without thinking, Harry opened his mouth and replied, "*:My name is Harry... You're at a wizarding school....*"

Someone screamed. Harry jerked his head in the direction to see Melissa Tracer, a fourth year Ravenclaw and one of their Quidditch team's Chasers, staring at him with wide eyes. She wasn't the only one. Most people there, staff included, was staring at him strangely. Malfoy looked downright horrified. Snape looked confused - intrigued, almost.

"*:How do I get out of here?:*" Hissed the cobra, startling Harry out of his look-about.

"...I don't know. That guy over there is who brought you here, though." Replied Harry, nodding towards Malfoy.

At the same time Harry looked back up at the boy in question, the snake's head twisted around to do the same thing. This seemed to unnerve Malfoy to the point of taking a few steps back. His backpeddling increased when the cobra turned on him and began slithering back at him, hissing up a storm.

But before he could reach the terrified blonde, a burst of magic cut through the barrier, striking the snake and causing it to burn up on the spot. Snape had his wand out, though his eyes were still aimed towards Harry. The magical barrier had obviously been dissolved.

But aside from Malfoy's sudden, frightful retreat from the arena, no one moved. He jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Solieyu was standing behind him, an unreadable expression on his face. Leaning in closer, he whispered, "We need to talk. **NOW.**"

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"What's the big deal? What happened back there?" Harry asked, once he, Tonks, and Solieyu were all up in their hidden tower.

"You really don't know?" Solieyu asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Do I *LOOK* like I know?" Replied Harry, starting to feel very cross. It was as if something important had flown over his head.

"Harry... Did you know you were a Parselmouth?" Tonks' quiet voice asked.

"A what?"

"Honestly, with all the reading you do, I'm surprised you don't already know" Tonks said, exchanging a worried glance with Solieyu.

"It's a person who can talk to snakes." Said the long-haired boy.

"...So what? I bet loads of other people--" Harry began.

"No." Solieyu said, cutting him off. "Not loads. Not even a few. It's very rare. Rarer than Metamorphmagi are."

"Wonderful. Another hidden talent." Grouched Harry. "But... what's the big deal? So what if I can talk to snakes?"

"Harry..." Tonks began, walking over and placing a hand on his shoulder. "Salazar Slytherin was a Parselmouth. One of the most famous... So was Voldemort..."

Something clicked in Harry's brain. He looked from Tonks to Solieyu, then slumped, groaning. "And since I just told that snake where he was and how he got there, everyone probably thinks I'm the guy that bloody writing was talking about."

"Probably." Solieyu agreed, shaking his head. "...And is that what you said? All we could hear was you hissing back at the snake. Frankly, it was somewhat disturbing."

"Yeah... Your voice sent chills down my spine." Tonks added, shivering at the memory.

"Sounded like English to *me*, though." Harry said. "Hell, the *cobra* sounded like it was speaking English... ...Guess this explains the zoo incident, though..."

"The zoo incident?" Asked Solieyu.

"Um... Yeah... Last year, not long after meeting Tonks, I got dragged along to the zoo with my 'family' and one of my cousin's friends. I... Well, there was an incident involving a snake and disappearing glass... Of course, I got blamed for it. Never occurred to me that a talking snake was *odd*, really... It just wanted to be set free..."

Harry slumped down to the floor, sighing. "This whole day's been a mess."

Tonks sat down on one side of him, Solieyu on the other.

Harry laughed mirthlessly. "I can't even imagine what George must have been thinking when he heard me. Bet he wants to beat me black and blue."

"I dunno." Tonks said, leaning against his healing shoulder. Solieyu had applied a basic charm to help close the wound. He would still have to go to Madam Pomfrey later, but it would do in a pinch. "He doesn't seem the type to go with whatever everyone else is. I'm sure he'd think it was *odd*, but I doubt he thinks you're the one that petrified Fred..."

"From what you told me, he didn't seem very angry at you when you found him" Solieyu added.

"Yeah, but that was *before*. I wonder if he's looking for me..." Harry wondered.

"Want to go see? You need to properly get that shoulder looked at, anyway." Tonks said, tugging Harry's clothes out to get a look at the cut. "I oughta deck that pompous jerk."

"Which? Lockhart or Malfoy?" Harry asked.

"Both."

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It was a few hours after supper had been served. Harry was pondering whether to go out and enjoy the fresh, night air or to retire to Ravenclaw Tower and curl up with a good book. He wandered the halls to test waters with the other students, as well. Sure enough, popular opinion seemed to squarely peg him as the Heir of Slytherin. Which was absolutely absurd, since he *hated* Slytherin and was a Ravenclaw besides.

Still, logic was never something that was spread about *with* rumors, so Harry tried not to let it bug him.

What *did* bug him was the strange look George Weasley had given him when he had approached the redhead en route to the hospital wing. Harry wanted to make sure that George didn't think like the rest

of the idiotic masses at Hogwarts. The two talked as they made their way upstairs and, to Harry's relief, George thought the rumors were a load of rubbish, as well. After a visit to see how Fred was doing - still no change - Harry had left feeling much more somber.

It was this, more than anything else, that finally decided what he was to do with the rest of the night. And it was in his final resting spot that Tonks found him hours later, gazing out at the stars while leaning on their tower's railing.

"Hey." She said, approaching and moving to lean beside him.

"Hm? Oh, hi... Just get here?" Harry said, snapping out of the slight daze he was in.

"Whatcha doin' up here so late? S'a good thing Filch is useless without his cat or I probably would've been caught on my way up here." Tonks said, nudging Harry in the arm.

"Sorry..."

Tonks blinked. "What's up? You seem out of it."

"Mm... I dunno. This whole day's been... Odd." Harry said, looking away to keep Tonks from catching the slight flush of his cheeks.

"Yeah..." Agreed Tonks, turning her gaze skyward. "Don't think Malfoy's gonna bother you for awhile though. Probably scared you'd summon a legion of snakes on him or something."

"Yeah..."

"...Oh, don't tell me it finally got to you." Tonks said, sighing. "Everyone at this school is a twit, Harry. They'd believe that Ron Weasley was really Dumbledore if you spun a good-enough yarn."

"It's just weird. Very weird. Have you ever had a *crowd* of people go silent and *part* as you approached? It didn't bother me earlier, but... I dunno. People seem like I'm poisonous or something. At least the better part of Ravenclaw's acting normal to me still." Harry scowled.

"Except Terry." Tonks noted.

"Did you *really* expect him to do otherwise?" Harry asked. "It's bloody Terry Boot. The dumbest person to somehow squeak into Ravenclaw ever."

"Here here." Tonks said, grinning slightly.

"Ah, I dunno, Tonks. It's just odd is all. It feels surreal more than it annoys me, per se. I don't *mind* it, but it's still..."

"Yeah, I can imagine. Hey, maybe Snape'll leave you alone now. Gotta look at the bright side of things!" Tonks said, patting Harry on the back.

"I suppose..."

"Oh, c'mon, Harry. Lighten up! You aren't suited to brooding. You're too scrawny for it."

"*Scrawny!*" Harry repeated, glaring at Tonks.

"Yeah! Scrawny!" Tonks said, grinning widely now. "There wasn't a lotta padding when I fell on you earlier. If you've put on some weight since then, by all means prove me wrong!"

"You're one to talk, you are!" Harry scowled, his lower lip protruding slightly.

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?" Tonks asked, narrowing her eyes.

"It means you're *just* as scrawny as I apparently am, that's what!" Harry declared.

"Oh, *does* it now?"

"Yeah, it does!" Harry stated, sticking his tongue out at Tonks, who twitched and lunged at him. Fortunately, his Seeker reflexes kicked in and he dodged back inside of the Tower, laughing.

Tonks whirled around and smirked. "And what's so funny, exactly? If you hadn't noticed, there's only one way out of that room and I'm guarding it. You'd never have time to open the trapdoor and escape *that* way."

"...Crap."

The word had barely left Harry's mouth before he was pounced to the floor in a distinct unflattering way. He was then tickled mercilessly until he had proclaimed Tonks beautiful in every way, stated that he - as a male - was wrong about everything, and that he would stop brooding in the Tower forevermore. Only after all of that did Tonks hop off of him and declare her business there finished.

"Shoulda never... told you... I was ticklish...!" Harry wheezed out, trying to catch his breath.

Tonks smirked, sitting cross-legged next to him. "Probably wasn't a good idea, no."

Harry groaned, but decided to stretch out on the nice, cool stone floor. "...S'not bad down here... Wish I could conjure a pillow or something, though."

"Yeah. Hard head meets hard floor." Tonks said, nodding very sagely.

"Oi!"

"C'mon, you can't sleep up here." Tonks said, rolling her eyes. "You'd catch an awful cold or something. This isn't some kind of nest for you to hide in. Gotta leave it, learn to fly, and deal with the real world again sooner or later."

Harry blinked. "...What did you say?"

Tonks tilted her head. "Toldja you'd catch a cold or something."

"No no, not that part..." Harry said, quickly pushing himself up into a sitting position. There was an odd gleam in his eyes. A grin slowly spread across his face and, when he turned to face Tonks, she could

see his eyes practically twinkling - Which, for whatever reason, seemed to cause her to have a sudden shortage of breath.

"Tonks, you're brilliant!" Harry suddenly declared, pulling her into a tight embrace.

Tonks, who was already utterly baffled by Harry's sudden behavior change, blushed at the sudden hug she had been tugged into. "H-Harry, are you feeling alright? I mean, of course I'm brilliant, but... uh... wanna explain why you think so?"

"Some kind of nest!" Said Harry, pulling back to look at Tonks properly.

"...Say what now?"

"It's the perfect name for the tower!" Harry said, backing up so he could try and make sense to the girl. "We're Ravenclaws, right?"

"Right..."

"And as far as we know, only you, me, and Leon know about this spot, right?"

"Right..."

"Well, that's it then, isn't it? Let's call the place the Raven's Nest!"

Tonks blinked. "...The Raven's Nest?"

"Yeah! No one would have a clue what on earth we'd be talking about, so we wouldn't have to be so quiet about mentioning the place around others! And it's much better than calling it our 'secret tower,' isn't it?" Said Harry.

"Sure, I guess so, but..." Tonks was cut off as a laughing Harry once more pulled her into an embrace. The day had been strange, but Harry's random cheerful mood swing was even stranger. Not that Tonks planned to complain or anything.

"So... that's why you're brilliant." Harry breathed as he pulled away once again, that twinkling still in his eyes.

"Yeah..." Said Tonks, feeling once more at a loss for words and breath.

For the longest time, the two Ravenclaws sat there, staring into one another's eyes. And, after awhile, something seemed to occur to Harry. There he was, alone in a spot only he and his two best friends knew about, sitting very close to a girl he was certain he cared about as much more than just a friend. It was dark out, the stars were shining, and a faint wind was blowing through the Nest.

Swallowing became very difficult for Harry as he realized all of this.

"Tonks..." He managed to croak out.

"Y-Yeah...?" From the tone of her voice, Harry was almost certain that the same set of thoughts had passed through her mind, as well.

"...I...I'm not sure. I...um... I just..." Harry said, feeling highly annoyed that he couldn't string together one coherent sentence. His babbling was halted when one of Tonks' fingers was placed over his lips. He blinked, going crosseyed as he tried looking at it.

"Shh." Tonks said, smiling. "I know what you're trying to say."

Tonks moved her finger away, leaned in, and very briefly placed her lips to Harry's before getting to her feet and making a quick exit from the Nest.

Harry didn't move for nearly an hour afterwards.

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Author's Notes: **FIRST KISS!** Bet no one saw THAT coming!

And look how quickly I got this chapter churned out! This is what happens when I'm ENJOYING writing something. And this chapter was nothing but a joy to write. The Dueling Club was always my

favorite part of Chamber. And I wanted to have a LITTLE action, since nothing's really happened at all so far.

Lot of firsts and such in this chapter, too. Harry's first real conversation with a snake, - the zoo incident doesn't count in my opinion - Tonks' first clumsy trip, (what a result, huh? Oh, I SO wish I had some fanart of that scene. Leon standing in the background, laughing at a tangled-up, pajama-clad Harry and Tonks) the very important first kiss, and the naming of the tower. I hope the name doesn't come across as goofy or anything. I thought it fit rather well. And it was a nice lead-in to a sweet Honks moment, so phooey on you if you DON'T like it all.

Chapter 10 will be pretty fun, as well. Harry's Quidditch Accident, the second victim falls, and the plan to infiltrate Slytherin begins to form. I hope you guys have a good idea of how they'd pull it off, since they won't be brewing Polyjuice Potion this time around. I just hope I can write the actual explanation out. -I- know how it's going to go down, I just hope it doesn't come off as being confusing to anyone else. Good thing I made lots of notes for that. The infiltration itself won't be until Chapter 11, though. Chapter 10 will have a good amount of cute little awkward moments between our lead pairing. You've GOT to after having the first kiss, right?

This chapter was also much bigger than the average chapter by a good 5kb. So not only was this a QUICK update, it was a LONG update! Uh, I hope the colons around the Parseltongue lines come through. FFN's wacky removal of random crap. And there was something funky that happened during formatting here. I was randomly jerked back to the top of the file while I was working on the last section. Dunno if I just hit a part of the panel up there wrong or what. The dumb document manager keeps deleting question marks when they're placed beside exclamation points and vice versa. So if there's a line that LOOKS like it should have both, yet only has one... That's why.

Anyway, hope you all enjoyed! Cheers, all!

Chapter 10 – Of Stupidity and Suspicious

Harry sighed, nibbling idly on his eagle-feather quill as he stared over his latest Charms essay. It was up to his usual standards, he was sure of that. He just felt like he had forgotten something. And he hated when he felt that way. Something was trying to poke through at the back of his mind to tell him what was bugging him so badly, but it just couldn't do it. With another sigh, Harry rolled up the foot and a half of parchment and put his quill away. He then spent a good minute making sure bits of feather weren't in his mouth. He wasn't sure when he had developed such a bad habit, but he absolutely hated it.

December had rolled in, and it had been nearly a month since the Dueling Club and the 'incident' thereafter. Neither Harry nor Tonks had brought the kiss up after the fact, but the first week afterwards had been awkward for both of them. Solieyu had been informed of the Raven's Nest getting a final name as well as what had transpired in it. Of course, the pale boy couldn't resist commenting about how he better not find any eggs upon entering it. Harry had to force himself not to fling something at his friend.

Snow had also fallen over the Hogwarts grounds, leaving Harry with the uneasiness that winter usually brought with it. He was trying to get over the lingering effects of living with the Dursleys, but it wasn't easy. Tonks had all but dragged him out for a good, old fashioned snowball fight one day, which had helped. Harry remembered that particular day because little Luna Lovegood had made an absolutely huge snow-something-or-other by herself. When asked, she claimed it was a Shrieking Wigdigger. Whatever in the blazes *that* was. The girl had also been running about with an amulet that she claimed helped to ward off vampires. Harry tried pointing out that there *weren't* any vampires at Hogwarts, to which Luna just smiled and pointed to the amulet, saying, "See, it works."

Groaning, Harry closed his eyes and let his head flop against the back of his chair in the common room. It was late, probably around midnight, and he was the only one still awake. Probably had something to do with the rapidly-approaching Quidditch match against Gryffindor. Lynch had been working them absolutely ragged

for the past two and a half weeks, despite Fred Weasley still being laid-up in the hospital wing. Gryffindor would need a replacement Beater and, Lynch had figured, whoever it was couldn't possibly be as good as the twins were when they worked in unison.

As it stood, it seemed that they were going to be playing in what could almost be classified as a blizzard, if the Prophet's weather reports could be trusted. There was a massive snowstorm blowing through later in the week. It figured that the Quidditch match was scheduled for the very day the storm was set to arrive. He had already been annoyed that finding the Snitch was tougher than normal with so much snow all over the place. After awhile, a sort of snow blindness set in on him, since he was looking down so much. Lynch had jumped on him for missing three 'easy' grabs in training so far.

But Gryffindor's Seeker was nothing special. At least, not to Harry. Though if George Weasley's gloating was anything to believe, the only female Weasley child seemed to have some sort of natural Seeker ability to her. Harry would believe it when he saw it, though, and paid little mind to the boasts. George was doing much better now, though he still seemed awfully tired. Neville Longbottom had told Harry one day that George had been staying up late into the night, sitting with his petrified brother. Harry hoped that Professor Sprout would hurry with the antidote. It seemed to be taking forever to make.

The school hadn't received any further attacks, which seemed to make everyone relax and forget about the writing on the wall. But Solieyu kept insisting that the foul presense he had detected back on Halloween was still lurking nearby.

Harry, in what little free time he had between Quidditch practice, classes, and homework, had been trying to figure out just what in the world his friend might *be*. If he was human, the boy was unlike any that Harry had met before. The first thing Harry had touched upon was lycanthropy. The built-in, enhanced senses seemed to fit, anyway. But Harry had been slacking in checking the moon's phases to see if Solieyu vanished on nights of the full moon. He was simply too worn out.

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"I **HATE** this place!" Harry wailed, slumping back into the bed he had been placed into.

"It isn't very fond of you either, dear." Dryly replied Madam Pomfrey as she passed by.

Harry glared after her. "Ya know, nurses are supposed to be kind to their patients! **KIND!**"

"I don't have the patience for my patients. Especially you." Replied the nurse in a tone equally as dry as before. "Why on Earth did you let that bumbling fool try to heal you, anyway? Should have come to me the moment it happened!"

"Yeah, well, excuse me, but it's a bit hard to climb four flights of ever-changing stairs when your **BLOODY LEG'S HAD ITS BONES REMOVED!**" Harry yelled, hefting his deboned limb up and letting it slump back to the bed with a squishing sound. "And for the record? I didn't *let* that 'bumbling fool' try to heal me - he took it upon himself to do it, despite my protests!"

Madam Pomfrey passed back by, giving Harry a raised eyebrow as she did so. "It wouldn't surprise me. Gilderoy Lockhart's famous for not listening to others, yet expecting *them* to listen to everything *he* has to say."

"At least we agree on one thing, then." Harry groused, crossing his arms and glaring daggers at the ceiling. "I hope he falls down the stairs or something. Wish Fred could talk. I'm sure he could help me figure out a way to get even with the golden dandy."

Snorting as she inspected the still-petrified Weasley, Madam Pomfrey said, "Yes, well, he isn't. Nor does it seem he'll *be* better until Pomona gets her Mandrakes fully grown and harvested. And I'm thankful *she's* doing it. I've had the 'pleasure' of doing it myself and let me tell you, it's no fun task."

"So I've seen. Though it was funny seeing Malfoy remove his earmuffs to see what the big deal was..." Harry said, remembering one of his favorite Herbology classes to date.

"That boy's in here almost as often as you." Said the nurse in a sour tone. "I swear, this one and his brother *do* keep me busy..."

"Have more free time now, do you?"

"You'd think so. But the other Weasley twin seems keen on making up for the lack of his brother by doubling his efforts."

Harry snorted. "Seen that, too. George said that Fred would lynch him if he didn't carry on the fine art of pranking. Oh, uh... you might want to prepare something to reduce severe swelling."

Madam Pomfrey's head peeked out from behind the curtain hiding Fred Weasley. "Swelling? ...Do I even want to know what part of the body that boy is going to blow up *this* time?"

"Probably not. Just expect a lot of embarrassment on both ends of the healing" Replied Harry, cryptically.

As Madam Pomfrey let out a frustrated sigh, she left Fred's side and headed back to her office, darkly muttering about enlarged buttocks and other such body parts.

Alone with his thoughts, Harry sunk down in bed, occasionally prodding his boneless leg. The day had started out so well, too! The Quidditch match *had* been going swimmingly! Then weird things began happening...

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"Ellie! Tim! Get this damned thing *away* from me!" Harry yelled over his shoulder as he ducked. Roughly ten minutes into the Quidditch match, one of the bludgers had started seeking out Harry... and *only* Harry. This was, to say the least, bizarre. Harry had yelled something and cast a glare at George Weasley in passing once, but the redhead shouted back that he didn't have any idea what was wrong, either.

As it was, it took both Ravenclaw Beaters working full time to keep Harry from being bashed in the face with the rogue bludger. Eventually, Steven Lynch called for a time-out and assembled the team on the ground.

"What the hell's going on up there!" Lynch demanded.

"One of the bludgers is out for my blood." Harry scowled. "Someone's hexed it, but George doesn't seem to know anything about it. And I trust him. He wouldn't play dirty."

"Have the Slytherins been around the case at all lately?" Asked Timothy Rachett, one of the Beaters.

"Not that I know of. Their last practice was over a week ago." Lynch replied.

"Looks, guys..." Harry began. "Tim and Ellie can't keep circling me. I can't find the Snitch that way... Just smash the stupid bludgers at the Gryffindors. I'll deal with the rogue one if it decides to come after me again. We'll deal with solving the problem after the game's over."

"Are you sure?" Lynch asked.

"Positive. We can't let one little problem ruin our game plans. I'll just have to keep myself moving."

"It won't be easy keeping an eye out for the bludger *and* the Snitch, Harry." Said Melissa Tracer, a Chaser.

"I know, I know... But there's nothing to be done for it, is there?" Harry said. "Let's get back in the air."

"We're still gonna try keeping it away from you." Ellie Shott, the other Beater, said.

"Well, beat it on down the pitch, then. Just don't concentrate solely on it. Leaves more than one of us open to the *other* bludger." Harry said.

"And Weasley won't hesitate in using that opening to their advantage." Lynch added.

"Yeah. George may not cheat, but he'll gladly take an opening." Harry agreed.

"Okay, so do we all know what we're going to be doing? Harry will keep after the Snitch as usual. Ellie, Tim, you two keep an eye on the rogue bludger but don't obsess over it. Liss, Carol and I will keep trying to get past their bloody Keeper. Ray, keep watch over the right goal. They're favoring it for some reason." Said Lynch, eyeing each member of the team as he spoke to them.

And that was that. The time-out ended, the Ravenclaw team ascended again, and the game resumed. Harry took up moving in a zig-zag pattern around the field, his eyes darting back and forth rapidly. The rogue bludger was somewhere downfield and Ellie seemed to be trying to hit one of Gryffindor's Chasers with it. The Gryffindor Seeker was lower than Harry was, but his broom was an old Cleansweep model. If push came to shove, Harry would at least have the speed advantage. He just hoped the Snitch would appear high enough to give him a better edge.

The game continued almost normally after that, though Harry did have to dive out of the way of the rogue bludger a few times. Almost half an hour after the time-out had been taken, the Snitch finally decided to reappear. It was sitting just under Gryffindor's Keeper's legs. Oliver Wood didn't seem to notice, either. Neither did their team's Seeker, for that matter.

Harry flattened himself against his broom and took off at top speed across the field, diving into a level position with the Snitch. The Gryffindor Seeker noticed too late and attempted to catch up, but it was no use. Harry's broom was simply too fast. Wood let out a surprised cry and yelled for the Seeker to hurry up, but by that time, Harry's fingers had curled around the fluttering, golden ball.

Cheers erupted from the Ravenclaw stands. Oliver Wood cursed. Harry turned his broom around and was about to soar out towards the rest of his team when he saw the rogue bludger flying at top speed toward him, Ellie and Tim hot on its tail. Harry's eyes bugged out and he quickly pulled his broom into a climb. But he did so too late. The

bludger smashed into his right leg, producing a very audible cracking noise from his knee.

Harry cried out in pain and let go of the Snitch, bringing his leg up and clutching a hand over his broken kneecap. Without proper control, his broom began spiralling slowly down to the ground, where Harry rolled off and onto the soft pitch. His breath coming through clenched teeth, Harry barely heard Lynch's panicked cry for him to move. Harry cracked his eyes open and just managed to force himself to roll left. The rogue bludger slammed into the spot where Harry's head had previously been. But it quickly pulled itself from the ground and was about to make a second attempt at caving Harry's skull in when a flurry of spells collided with it. The bludger was rendered flightless, weightless, and covered in boils for some reason. Harry wasn't in the mood to figure out why the last one had even worked.

"We're sorry!" Tim said as he and Ellie landed nearby. "We only noticed after it had shot off at you, though..."

"We couldn't get to it in time..." Ellie added.

"S'alright." Harry hissed, sitting himself up. "But I think it broke a few things in there... Not gonna be able to get to the hospital wing on my own..."

The rest of the Ravenclaw team had landed, circling Harry. Before anyone could suggest how to move him to the hospital wing, however, an all-too-familiar voice broke through.

"Step aside, step aside... let me see the poor boy!"

"Oh god... Not him... Anyone but *him*!" Harry groaned.

Gilderoy Lockhart stepped through the Ravenclaw team, smiling as if he had just heard a good joke. "Ahh, Harry... Marvelous catch, terrible ending, eh? Now then, I learned a few good healing spells in my travels - important for staying alive, you know. Let me see now... broken bones, broken bones..."

"No, look... Just help me get to Madam Pomfrey. I'm sure--" Harry began.

"Oh, don't be silly." Lockhart said, waving a dismissive hand. "I can help you out perfectly fine. Ah! I remember now..." And with the wave of his wand, the pain in Harry's knee went away.

But so did the *rest* of the feeling in it.

Blinking, Harry looked down. His leg looked strangely shapeless. Harry tried to move his injured leg, but all he got in return was a sort of sloshing noise. Harry opened his mouth to ask what had just happened, but his brain realized it before he could get any words out.

"You idiot!" Harry cried. "You didn't *heal* the bones, you *REMOVED* them!"

Lockhart blinked as well. He picked up Harry's now-boneless leg, lifted it at an odd angle, and let it flop to the ground. Looking slightly nervous now, the man got to his feet. "Yes, well... no harm done! You'll just need to see Madam Pomfrey now, is all!"

"That's what I wanted to do in the first place!" Harry yelled at Lockhart's rapidly-retreating form.

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And that had been that. Lynch and Solieyu, who had taken the field alongside Tonks and several other worried Ravenclaws, had helped Harry 'walk' up to the hospital wing. It had been slow going, as Harry could only hop his way along, despite most of his weight being on his friends.

Tonks had thought the whole situation was rather amusing, and kept prodding and squeezing Harry's deboned limb for awhile. Harry had crossed his arms and allowed himself to brood. Thankfully, Madam Pomfrey had come along shortly and made the girl stop. She also made Harry's friends vacate the hospital wing, citing Harry's need for rest. Harry tried objecting, but was overruled by the stern matron rather easily.

Night had now fallen, and Harry had little to do aside from staring at the walls and wishing Fred could talk. He was mentally begging for something - anything - to happen to alleviate his boredom.

Unfortunately, fate had once again decided to teach Harry not to wish for things. Moments later, the doors to the hospital wing opened and a number of professors walked in, along with a small body that seemed strangely stiff.

'*Damn!*' Harry swore mentally. He had pretended to be asleep the moment the doors open. The staff was a good distance away and seemed concentrated on what appeared to be another victim of whatever had gotten Fred and Mrs. Norris, however. '*I need to stop asking for things to happen...*'

"Where was she, Albus?" Asked Flitwick in his squeaky voice.

"Near Ravenclaw Tower, I am afraid..." Said Dumbledore, his voice grim.

"So close!" Flitwick gasped. "Are the students *inside* the Tower safe?"

"They should be, Filius... But *I am* worried now. This is the second attack so far... And I have an awful feeling that more are to come..." Said the headmaster.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Asked McGonagall. "Surely there must be some way to guard against this kind of thing..."

"If only it were that easy, Minerva..." Sighed Dumbledore.

Flitwick let out a great sniffle.

"Now now, Filius, everything will be fine in the end. She, like Fred Weasley and Mrs. Norris, was merely petrified." Said Dumbledore comfortingly. "She will be back to normal just as soon as Pomona has the Mandragora crop ready for harvest."

"But still..." Said Flitwick. "She's so young..."

"It seems to strike without care of age, gender, or species." Said Dumbledore thoughtfully. "In any case, I will go inform Poppy. Minerva, if you would be so kind as to escort Filius back to his quarters?"

"Of course. Come along..." Said Minerva, putting a hand on Flitwick's back - it was odd to see her hunched over - and steering him out of the hospital. Dumbledore watched them go, then turned and strided across the room to knock on the door to the nurse's office. A moment later and Harry overheard a hushed conversation that was just quiet enough to be impossible to make out. He had closed his eyes the moment McGonagall and Flitwick had left.

His thoughts were too busy, anyway. Whoever the second victim was, she was female, a Ravenclaw, and either a first or second year, judging by the staff's discussion. Harry tried to push away thoughts that Tonks was laying motionless down the room from him, but he couldn't help but worry. After awhile, the footsteps of the headmaster could be heard moving back across the room. After a brief pause at the bed of the second victim, he too exited the hospital, leaving the room silent once more.

Harry immediately sat up, squinting in the darkness to try and make out who it was that had been brought in. But she was too far away to ascertain any details. Scowling, Harry slipped out of bed, making sure not to put any weight on his bad leg. Madam Pomfrey had given him some Skele-Grow to take earlier, and his whole leg was hurting something fierce as bone fragments regrew themselves.

A slow hopping journey later and Harry was at the girl's bedside, panting slightly from the exertion. After he had caught his breath, he peered in closer to see who it was. When he found out, he grimaced. It wasn't Tonks, but...

With a sigh, Harry made his way back to his own bed. Once laying down again, he gazed across the room. A Ravenclaw and a Gryffindor. Harry couldn't help but wonder if a Hufflepuff was next.

He wasn't looking forward to seeing the news spread. Hopefully, he could escape the hospital wing early the next day to tell the others before any announcements were made over breakfast. Harry had the distinct feeling that, despite how he felt about the girl, Solieyu would take the news rather badly.

After all, Luna Lovegood *did* seem to have a thing for him.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Later that night, Harry was awakened by a strange noise. Certainly a noise that wasn't normal in a wizarding school's hospital in the dead of night, anyway. Harry reached for his glasses and, quickly slipping them on, gaped at what he saw.

At the foot of his bed was the hunched, whimpering form of Dobby the house elf.

"**YOU!**" Harry growled, anger flaring inside of him. "What are **YOU** doing here!"

Dobby cringed, shrinking back even further. "Dobby was simply checking on Harry Potter..." He said, grabbing at his ears. "Dobby did not think Harry Potter would still be here..."

"My leg's got no bones in it. I can't exactly hobble off." Harry muttered.

"Dobby was so sure his bludger would result in Harry Potter leaving Hogwarts." Said the house elf, staring forlornly at the bedsheets.

"Your bludger! *You* hexed it to follow me around! Why! Why have you been tormenting me ever since summer! Are you trying to get me killed? Because you're doing a bloody fine job so far!" Harry hissed, trying not to yell outright. He didn't want Madam Pomfrey on his case.

"Not kill... never kill, Harry Potter, sir..." Dobby murmured, shaking his head. "But... bad things is happening at Hogwarts... and Harry Potter *must not get involved...*!"

"Bad things...?" Harry echoed. His eyes darted left to the curtain hiding Fred Weasley, then across the room at the bed Luna Lovegood was laying motionless in. "...You know what's doing this, don't you? *You* didn't do this to them, did you!"

"What? No! No, what did this is... is..." Dobby faltered, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly. His head jerked around in several directions and, spotting the bottle of Skele-Grow nearby, grabbing it and began pummeling himself in the head with it.

"What are you doing! Be quiet! Madam Pomfrey's going to hear you!" Harry ground out through clenched teeth. It was *very* difficult dealing with a house elf, Harry decided.

"Dobby was about to speak bad things about his master... oh, stupid Dobby! Bad Dobby!" Moaned the house elf, winding up for another session of beating his own head in. But Harry shot an arm out and grabbed the Skele-Grow bottle away from him.

"Dobby, calm down! Okay... Okay, so you can't say anything bad about your master... I assume *he* has something to do with this, then. And I'm guessing I can't ask anything about who he is or you'll start injuring yourself again, right?" Harry asked.

The house elf nodded, rubbing his forehead.

"Okay..." Harry said, sitting back and idly tapping a finger on the bottle slowly. "So... Whoever your master is... he's involved in... whatever the hell's petrifying my friends. You're obviously going behind his back to 'warn' me..." Here, Harry glared at Dobby before continuing, "...and...that still doesn't give me any useful information. Damn."

"Harry Potter *must* leave Hogwarts..." Dobby said, quietly. "This is only the beginning, sir... much worse things is to be happening... and Harry Potter must not be around..."

"I won't leave my friends and this school to be overrun by... whatever's doing this to them." Harry said.

"...Harry Potter is a brave wizard, yes... But Dobby fears bravery won't help in the end..." Said Dobby.

"And why's that?"

"Dobby cannot say." Said Dobby, ears lowering as he looked up at Harry. "Dobby has already said too much. If Dobby's master ever finds out, Dobby will be tortured... or worse..."

"You say that like it's happened to you before." Harry noted.

"Dobby is punished almost daily..." Said the creature, nodding. "But Dobby has never been this bad before..."

"So why 'warn' me?" Harry asked, shooting another glare Dobby's way. "Why bother? Why *me*!"

"Because Harry Potter is a great wizard, sir... Greater than even he knows, perhaps... Harry Potter must not be endangered here! Harry Potter must *leave*!" Dobby cried.

The light in Madam Pomfrey's office turned on, causing both elf and human to freeze and look towards it. Harry quickly slammed the bottle of Skele-Grow back on the table beside the bed. He turned back to tell Dobby to leave... But the house elf was already gone.

Just as well, because a few seconds later, the door to the nurse's office opened. "What *is* all the commotion out here about!" She demanded.

"Uh... n-nothing!" Harry said, quickly. "My leg's just... really, really hurting is all... I didn't mean to yell, but..."

Sighing, Madam Pomfrey ducked back into her office for a moment, coming back out with a small vial of liquid, which she handed to Harry. "Here, then. It'll help you sleep. The pain can't be numbed away, since the ingredients for something like that would have an adverse effect on those in the Skele-Grow. But this is perfectly fine for you."

"Thanks." Said Harry, drinking the contents. "Sorry for waking you up."

Madam Pomfrey waved a hand dismissively as she turned and headed back to her office. "I'm a mediwitch, it's my job. Now get some rest, Mr. Potter."

"Yes, ma'am." Harry said, setting the vial down next to the Skele-Grow and removing his glasses. At least he hadn't told a complete lie. His leg was hurting quite a bit. It felt like a lot of very large splinters were moving around under the skin, a distinctly eerie feeling to be sure.

Laying back, Harry stared up at the ceiling and waited for the potion's effects to kick in. As he did, he tried fitting more pieces of the puzzle together. But a sleeping potion does little to clear one's mind and, before Harry could fit a single piece together with the rest of it, he had drifted off.

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A few days later, Harry was sitting up in the Raven's Nest doing his homework. He often went there for some peace and quiet, and today was no exception. The last few days hadn't been easy, for he or anyone else in Ravenclaw. News quickly spread about Luna winding up like Fred. Solieyu had been in to visit the girl every day since. Even more talk spread, as well. Students began spreading more rumors over Harry being the Heir of Slytherin, despite numerous attempts at trying to reason with them.

People were starting to part when he passed by again. Harry absolutely hated that and would have done something in retaliation...but that would have only further convinced several people. So he kept his distance and began isolating himself as often as he could. Which basically meant holing up in the Nest and trying not to think too hard. And, being a Ravenclaw, Harry found that incredibly hard to do.

He knew he wasn't the Heir of Slytherin. Tonks and Solieyu knew he wasn't. George Weasley knew he wasn't. Even Draco Malfoy didn't think Harry was the Heir of Slytherin. But that was for an entirely different reason altogether. Harry knew he shouldn't, but couldn't help wishing that whatever was claiming students would go after the blonde idiot next.

Tonks eventually found him, staring off into space rather than working on his Transfiguration essay. After watching him stare out at the clouds for a few minutes, she finally prodded him sharply in the arm. This worked, as Harry blinked and let out a quiet 'ow' as he rubbed the poked area. "Oh...Hi, Tonks. Been here long?"

"Long enough." Said the girl, raising an eyebrow. "What's with you?"

"Daydreaming." Harry replied, blandly.

"Oh, come off it." Tonks said, leaning back on her arms. "You really shouldn't let those idiots' rumors get to you like that. Hiding yourself away is only making them worse, you know. They say you're plotting who to exact your revenge on next."

Harry snorted. "'Next'? And what, exactly, was my reasoning for petrifying Fred and Luna?"

"Well, popular vote says that Fred hit you with a particularly nasty prank and Luna was just irritating enough for you to want her out of your hair." Tonks said.

"Bet that one isn't sitting well with Leon." Harry commented.

"Yeah, poor guy... I think she really grew on him, you know? She was cute, in a 'drives-you-insane' sort of way. Ever see her following him around like a lost puppy? It was absolutely adorable. Leon tried so hard not to notice, too." Tonks said, grinning.

"Tonks..."

"Yeah?"

"Back when I was regrowing my legbones... guess who paid me another visit?"

Tonks tilted her head. Harry had definitely seemed odd ever since leaving the hospital wing, but he hadn't stated the reason for it.

"I'll give you a hint." Harry continued. "He was indirectly responsible for my showing up at your house a bloody mess over summer."

"That house elf!"

"Exactly."

"How'd he get there? I thought you couldn't apparate onto Hogwarts grounds."

Harry sighed. "House elf magic must be strong enough to break through the wards on the place. I dunno. Anyway, he couldn't say anything directly, but he *did* give me some food for thought..."

Launching into the story of what he and Dobby had talked about that night, Harry threw his quill down in frustration. "It's just so damned annoying! It's like the whole picture is staring me in the face and I just can't see it! There are so many little pieces scattered around and I hate not being able to make any sense of them all...!"

Slipping an arm around Harry's shoulders, Tonks offered him a squeeze. "Shame we can't go and ask Malfoy if he's got any information on it, huh?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Oh yeah, you haven't been around much. Sorry. It's just that the little blonde idiot's been sauntering around telling everyone how wrong they've been. He says he knows who the Heir of Slytherin *really* is."

"Probably just a load of crap." Harry scowled. "Since when has Malfoy known anything?"

"Dunno. But he seems so damned sure of himself this time. He's been rubbing the attacks in the faces of us and the Gryffindors. I wish there was a way we could go and ask him directly. But fat chance he'd *tell* us, huh?" Tonks said, making a face.

But Harry's eyes were darting about. Tonks knew *that* look all too well. It meant that something had registered as useful in Harry's mind and he was in the middle of trying to work something out. Sure enough, a grin slowly spread on his face.

"Tonks, you're absolutely brilliant!" He declared.

"...Yes, I believe you've told me that in the past." Nodded Tonks. "But what am I brilliant for now?"

"We're going to get Malfoy to tell us what he knows." Said Harry.

"...And just why would he tell us anything?" Asked Tonks.

"Because he won't know it's us."

"Say what?"

"Are we Metamorphmagi or aren't we?" Said Harry, his mouth halfway between a grin and a devious smirk.

Tonks' eyes suddenly lit up. "Ooh, you want to try a full facial change? Harry, that's tough stuff! I've been practicing a lot longer than you have and..."

"I know, but... it doesn't have to be right away, does it? Christmas is just around the corner. I'm betting on Malfoy staying here like he did last year. So all we need to do is find out which Slytherins are hanging around, too. then we... I dunno, we distract a couple of them for awhile, take their looks, and try getting some information out of the Grande Royal Sod."

"...If we don't know who we're gonna be, how do we practice, Harry?" Tonks asked.

"Um... That's a very good question. I think we need to see if George can help us on this. I'm sure he could get a list of who's staying this year..." Harry said.

"How do you figure?"

"He's George." Harry said, blinking. "Him and Fred can seem to get their hands on anything if it's needed badly enough."

"...You have a point. Okay, I'm in. Should we go wrangle Leon away from his bedside vigil and fill him in?"

"Probably. I'm sure he'd be more than willing to help provide a distraction." Harry said, gathering his belongings and packing them away. "Let's go. We really don't have any time to waste on this..."

And with that, Tonks and Harry headed through the trapdoor and out of the Raven's Nest.

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Author's Notes: Ach! No one smite me! I figured having everyone's favorite loonie as the second victim would make the defeat of the basilisk even more satisfying and such. I checked through TPS's Christmas chapter and didn't see any mention of whether or not Malfoy had or hadn't stayed for Christmas then, so... I hope I didn't just plothole myself. I don't think I did. I should also probably apologize for the bland Quidditch match. There's a reason I don't write those things. Ugh.

Anyway, I'm sorry for the delay. Blame my getting all of Azumanga Daioh combined with a Grand Theft Auto - San Andreas speed run appearing within about a week of one another. But the chapter's longer than usual, so I hope that makes up for it. The next chapter's gonna be a spectacular headache, so it might take some time, too. I might have to pad it with a bit of amusing Metamorphmagus Training, but I don't think anyone'd mind. And I figure Harry's good enough at whatever he does that it wouldn't take too long once he really gets the hang of it. So no one shake a finger at me for having him catch up to Tonks. I've got THAT taken care of, too. He isn't going to be nearly as good at Tonks... and that's all I'll say about THAT plot point.

Anyway... Feel free to guess what saved Luna from the basilisk's deadly gaze if you want. I'm keeping record of victims and what kept them safe, so all will be explained eventually.

That's it from me. I'm-a go get through some more of that stuff to watch that I mentioned above. Sooner I do, sooner I get to the giant headache of Chapter 11 - Infiltration.

Post-Edit Notes: Good lord, this chapter's not gonna turn out well here. There was a LOT of question mark-exclamation point usage in the Harry vs Dobby scene... and given how FFN loves editing out one or the other when they're used side by side... Anyway, if something looks off, that's why. I also hope FFN hasn't done anything else to give me a headache. I hate this new login format and all the other changes. Bah!

Post-Edit Edit Notes: Yeah, FFN removed them all again, even though I added them back. God dammit, I hate this site. I'm officially

going looking for some other site to upload my fics to, because FFN's trying my patience. All these idiotic, pointless changes and they can't fix THAT? Bullcrap.

Chapter 11 – Infiltration

Somewhere in the darkness, a wolf's howl cried out. It was answered by a far-off howl that seemed almost pained. Silence passed for minutes, then the two howls joined together, sending their miserable wails to the heavens once more.

FLASH.

Whatever the hell it was, it wanted a bite out of Harry's hand. He had to quickly jerk it away. It didn't, however, stop the putrid thing from nearly melting his face off with a foul-smelling, acid-like discharge.

FLASH.

"I don't cry." Harry said in what could only be described as a pouting tone.

Tonks smiled a little, glad to see that Harry was starting to feel a bit better, at least. "You do too." She said, poking one of his shoulders. "Remember that time Leon accidentally clocked you in the pink bits with a snowball?"

"That thing had a giant stone in it! *Any* guy would've been crying if he got hit in such a sensitive spot...!" Harry argued back, making a face and squirming at the memory. "God, I felt like I was going to be sick for the rest of the day."

FLASH.

A burst of light suddenly shot through the kitchen door. It was all Harry could do to duck in time to avoid it. He had been waiting for this. And not eagerly, either. Quickly rushing to the far side of the room, Harry aimed his wand at the door just in time to see the old man crash his way in.

"Been having a go, have you?" Growled the old Auror, aiming his own wand at Dudley and spitting out a few quick healing charms. These closed the wounds that Harry's curses had inflicted, but didn't stop Dudley's sobbing fit. Once he was through patching Dudley up, he looked to Harry with both eyes. "He could've bled to death."

"Pity you got here when you did, then." Harry said, smiling coldly.

FLASH.

"*GET HIM!*" Fudge shrieked, pointing a shaking finger down at Harry.
"Stun him! *KILL* him! Just **STOP HIM!**"

Harry sighed quietly. He had come to the Ministry expecting things to boil over. But he was hoping to avoid a battle. Nonetheless, if these pathetic creatures wished to test his ability, then let them come. As a veritable army of Aurors flooded into the room, Harry's grin spread from ear to ear.

FLASH.

Pansy accepted the icecream and sat beside Harry on the sofa. She pushed the two scoops around the bowl for awhile before asking, "Why me?"

"Beg pardon?" Harry asked, mouth full.

"Why me, of all people? Why'd you contact ME instead of your little Ravenclaw buddies?" Pansy asked, staring at her food.

"You're the reason I'm alive." Harry answered, softly. "You're the one who put the idea of spell altering into my mind."

FLASH.

"Hi."

"Harry...?"

"Um... yeah... Hey, Tonks. I have a perfectly good explanation for everything that's happened, but I--mmph!"

FLASH!

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Harry groaned, clutching his head as he sat up. These dreams were getting really, *really* old! And what in the name of all that was magical

was that stupid, shadowed *thing* moving about in them? It was enough to drive a man insane, it was. At least this one ended in a better way than his most recent versions had. Blushing faintly at the thought of an older Tonks tackling him and firmly planting a kiss on his lips, Harry wagered he'd get little sleep. It was almost morning, anyway.

Swinging his legs out of bed, Harry glared across the room at Terry Boot's bed. As usual, the boy was snoring loud enough to wake the dead. But before Harry went to leave the room, he was going to do something to hopefully allow his other dorm-mates to sleep a little better.

And they did. They would later tell Harry that, Terry's screaming aside, they had slept very peacefully the rest of the night. As for Terry... he would just have to spend the rest of his life wondering why Harry Potter had dumped a whole pitcher of ice water out over his crotch, seemingly at random.

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"C'mon, Leon! Stay here with us this time!"

"Yeah, I'm sure your mum would understand..."

"Besides, we need you for something."

"Couldn't do it without your help!"

"It's a very important mission, y'know."

"Could mean making or breaking the whole operation!"

Solieyu watched as Harry and Tonks went back and forth, trying to convince him to stay at Hogwarts over the Christmas holidays. He had been intending to, since his mother was going off to visit her sister off in Prague. The two had been going on for a few minutes now. He would have stopped them if they would only stop making such horribly amusing faces as they went through their obviously-rehearsed speech.

Eventually, they started repeating themselves and looking more and more desperate. Solieyu held up a hand to stop them and murmured, "I was planning to stay. You didn't give me a chance to say so. What's the plan?"

Five minutes later, when the gaping and subsequent glaring had ended, Harry laid the plan out before Solieyu. It was going to be painfully simple if all went well. George Weasley would procure them a list of Slytherins staying over the holidays. From there, Harry and Tonks would decide on one boy and one girl and change their appearances accordingly. Solieyu would help distract the two Slytherins while Harry and Tonks infiltrated Slytherin to try and get information out of Malfoy.

"The problem with seemingly simple plans," Solieyu began after thinking over the plan for a few minutes. "Is the amount of unknowns. Harry, are you even capable of holding a different face? The most I've seen you do is switch hair and eye colors. And even then, it's only been in the Nest or wherever you two dragged me off to show me his latest progress..."

"Dunno. I figure it can't be *that* hard. Hair and eyes go a long way. Fixing the nose is the only thing I haven't tried too hard on..." Harry replied.

"I tried telling him to find a better way, but he convinced me that he'll be able to pull it off. Somehow." Tonks added.

"I will." Harry stated.

"You'd better. We're gonna get burned big time if something screws up." Tonks said.

"Someone else will be burned worse if we fail." Harry replied in an oddly calm tone.

Tonks and Solieyu exchanged a worried look.

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"No no no..." Tonks sighed, kneeling in front of a sitting Harry. "Okay, look. You can't change your nose like you can your eye and hair color. It's different. Your nose has stuff *in* it to worry about. Face shifting's *not* easy."

"I know, damn it!" Harry hissed, scowling in frustration. They had escaped to the Raven's Nest for a bit of training, and it was proving to be a very fruitless effort for Harry. For all his complaining, though, Tonks stayed calm and proved to be a surprisingly knowledgeable teacher.

"Look, mate, it's not so much envisioning a new nose and then trying to just change yours to that one. It's working with the stuff underneath. You've got to deal with how the septum and cartilage are gonna be moving and shifting, too. If you screw up, it's painful as *hell*. I had to be taken to St. Mungo's when I was little because I screwed up. The thin pieces of bone at the back of my septum were pushed deeper into my head and I had a *real* fun time having everything magically fixed." Tonks explained. "And all of that doesn't even include how to deal with junk further behind the nose itself..."

"When'd you get so smart about the human body then?" Harry grumped.

"When I had pieces of it moved around for me." Grumped Tonks right back. "Unless *you'd* like to explain to Madam Pomfrey why your hard palate's sticking out of the roof of your mouth, I'd suggest *listening* to me, too!"

"Yes, Professor." Harry replied in dry tones.

Tonks glared, but sat back on her legs and sighed. "Look, I just don't wanna see something happen to you, alright? I'm not trying to make you feel dumb, Harry."

"Yeah, I know... I just wish you had mapped out all of the internal bits I'd be having to worry about while *doing* this before I finalized things." Said Harry, arms crossing as he glared outside.

"C'mon. If I can do it, anyone can." Tonks said, slugging Harry in the shin.

"Oww!" Harry yipped, head jerking back to glare at Tonks, who was smirking up at him with Malfoy's face. Harry toppled over backwards, clutching his heart.

"Don't *do* that, dammit!"

Tonks' face reverted to normal as she dissolved into a fit of giggles. She had only taken on Malfoy's face twice before. One of those times, it had been to see Harry's reaction upon being awakened to the blonde's head looming over him. Harry had blinked a few times, finally seemed to realize what was going on, and completely freaked out. He jackknifed in bed, fell out, and backpeddled up against Terry's bed, all while grabbing his wand and putting his glasses on so fast that Tonks was worried he might accidentally gouge an eye out.

He still hadn't forgiven her for that one.

It took a few more hours of practice on Harry's part, but he finally managed to change his nose to something large and fat, much to Tonks' amusement. She told him to hold it for as long as he could, and Harry was forced to make a 'nose running' joke in reply, which earned him an eye roll.

Harry managed to hold his new nose for roughly ten minutes before it began shifting back to a more familiar shape on its own. Harry wasn't expecting this to happen and was quite alarmed at the sudden, rapid revert. Tonks told him it was perfectly normal and wouldn't cause him any injuries... so long as he wasn't drunk or somehow unconscious.

"Won't do you any good to get punched out or somethin' while you're tryin' to hold a different shape. Accidentally fell off a baby broom when I was little... happened just after I learned to change my hair around. When I woke up, I was completely bald. Had to wait for it to grow back out before I could start trainin' again. Wasn't very fun." Tonks explained.

"Have you ever shown me your original face?" Harry wondered aloud.

"Course I have." Smiled Tonks. "I've shown you and mum knows, of course."

"...What, that's it? Just me and her?"

"Mmhmm..."

Harry tilted his head and closed his eyes, trying to think back. But it was hard to remember just what form the girl was taking at any given time. Only extreme hair colors stood out to him, as Tonks often had blonde or dark brown hair. Frowning, he opened his eyes again. "Can't remember... Show me?"

"You sure you don't want to try and guess some more?" Tonks asked. "Remember when we first met?"

Harry let his eyes unfocus as he thought back. He had been in the park... it had been awfully rainy... and then out of nowhere, a very tomboyish girl had shown up. Harry distinctly remembered that she didn't blink very often. He smiled, thinking back to that moment. Everything in his life had changed for the better because he had met Tonks. He really did owe her a lot... certainly more than he knew how to properly repay.

He heard a sudden gasp come from his friend and he focused his eyes on her once more. Her eyes were shimmering slightly and she was smiling, looking down from where she had previously been staring.

"What?" He asked.

"You remembered." Said Tonks, crawling over close enough that she could fall against Harry in a tight hug.

Feeling distinctly confused, Harry nodded. "Y-yeah, I remembered... how did you know?"

Tonks sat back on her legs, giggling quietly. "Because your hair suddenly up and changed. Your eyes went next. Exactly how my hair and eyes were back when we met."

Cocking an eyebrow, Harry lifted a hand up to touch his hair. Rather than being out of control and black, it was now short and quite spiked up. Harry had the distinct impression that it was blonde. He also had the distinct impression that his eyes were a piercing shade of blue.

"Blue?"

"Blue." Tonks said, nodding. She closed her eyes for a moment and shifted her own hair and eyes back to their original forms.

Harry figured he should probably do the same. It would be distinctly odd to walk around with short, spiky blonde hair. Malfoy would probably be jealous, too. And just the thought of the Slytherin toddling after Harry, asking for hair care advice, gave him the jibblies.

"Hey, Harry?" Tonks murmured.

"Yeah?"

"Wanna just spend some time relaxing up here before we have to get the plan going?"

"Sure."

Harry stretched himself out on the floor, crossing his arms behind his head. Before he could protest, Tonks flopped down next to him and promptly decided to use his shoulder as a pillow. He tried protesting, but she claimed that if he dared deny her such a comfy position, she'd hex his hair a permanent shade of puce.

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Harry opened his eyes to find a pair of soft blue ones staring back down at him. Yawning, he smiled and murmured, "Morning."

"Not morning." Tonks replied.

"Nn? 'Course it is..." Said Harry, groggily.

"Harry...s'dark out." Said Tonks. "And we've just blown our first chance to go invade the Slytherin common room."

Harry stretched again, groaning as his body tried pulling him farther apart than he was capable of. Cracking one eye open fully, he smiled up at his friend. "Y'know, given the choice, I think I'd rather take an accidental nap with you than force myself to look like a Slytherin."

Tonks snorted. Rarely was Harry ever very coherent when he first woke up. Tonks liked trying to have conversations with him during this period, as he often said weird, if not adorable, things.

"Head hurts..."

"That's your brain trying to comprehend its own stupidity, mate. C'mon, let's get back to the Tower. Don't wanna get caught by Filch. He's been on a rampage lately." Tonks said.

Sitting up, Harry groaned as a few bones popped. "We're gonna have to learn to conjure some pillows and a mattress or something..."

"Ohh? Plan to fall asleep with me up here often, do you?"

Harry let out a squawk mid-stretch, going a lovely shade of crimson. "I...I didn't mean it like *that*! I just... I meant that I... um..."

Biting back a grin, Tonks just gave Harry a quick peck on the cheek as she headed for the trap door. "Oh, don't worry. You should know when I'm teasing you by now..."

But the kiss didn't seem to help at all. Rather, Harry was even darker red now. Tonks blinked at this, then shrugged and giggled. "Boys."

"Sh-shut up!" Harry said, turning around to glare at the girl. "I was just... thinking."

"Ohh? About what?"

Harry remained silent, but rubbed at the spot Tonks had kissed. It didn't take a rocket scientist to realize what must have been going through Harry's mind. It was rather cute to see him both groggy *and* flustered, though.

But then, seemingly out of nowhere, resolve made its way into Harry as he headed for where Tonks was. Opening the trap door, he smiled at his friend, murmured, "*Bonam Noctem Tibi Exopto*," and - for the briefest of moments - let his lips press up against Tonks'. This time *he* would be the one leaving behind a blushing and speechless friend.

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"You *kissed* her?" Solieyu asked, sitting on the edge of Harry's bed.

"Yeah... I guess I did. But it was only fair! She randomly did it to me, too..." Harry said, still rather flushed.

"Yes, I suppose so. So what did the random Latin mean?"

"I wished her a good night." Harry said. "I've been reading too many spellbooks lately. One of the authors, in a bit of scrawling along the side, said she always said that to her husband before they went to sleep. I just thought it was... was..."

"Cute?" Solieyu offered.

"Yeah. Well... I wouldn't say 'cute,' exactly, but... Something like that." Harry said, fidgeting as he poked at his bedsheets. "Wonder what's going through her mind right now..."

"Probably the same that's going through yours." Solieyu said. "Harry... Really. How do you feel about her?"

Harry let out a weak laugh as he keeled over backwards. "I can't explain it without being horribly sappy about it. She literally saved me, Leon. If it wasn't for her, befriending me in the park that day and then telling me about the wizarding world. I dunno where I'd be right now. Probably still getting beaten within an inch of my life at the Dursleys... How do you *tell* a girl something like that?"

"I think it just has to happen... You have plenty of time to figure out how to phrase it, Harry." Said Solieyu, reaching out and placing a reassuring hand on Harry's arm.

"Do I? With that... whatever-it-is going around and petrifying students, who knows? For all we know, I may be next. *She* may be next. I dunno what I'd do if anything ever did happen to her, Leon... But just thinking about it *hurts*. Does that make any sense at all...?"

"It does." Solieyu said, nodding slightly. "My mother once told me a story about when she and father were dating. She said they had a big row at one point and nearly broke up. She said the pain was almost too much to bear... and that she felt happier than she ever had before when they finally made up. She told me it was like a tightness in her chest that wouldn't go away. Especially if she thought about him finding someone to take her place..."

Harry closed his eyes. "Oh, god, I don't even want to think about something like that. But... the tightness, it is there. Sort of. I don't mean to, but sometimes I feel weird when I see her chatting with other guys..."

"Jealousy."

"Jealousy? ...I don't want to be the type of friend who gets that way, though. I'd be just like that prat Ron! Now there's a scary thought." Harry said, snorting.

"Indeed."

A silence fell over the two then.

"...Hey, Leon?"

"Yes?"

"...Do you think we're too young to fall in love?"

"Well..." Solieyu began. "I'd answer, but I'm afraid I just don't care about you in that way, Harry."

Harry sat up long enough to whomp Solieyu in the arm. Giving him the evil eye, he stretched back out and said, "You know what I meant."

"Yes, I did. But it was too good a chance to pass up." Said Solieyu, smirking. "...To be truthful, I don't know, Harry. I've never been in love before, so I can't comment on it. However..."

"However...?"

"However, I think that, if the time is right, and the people are right for each other, things will work out somehow, in the end."

"I hope they do. If I think too much about the future, and Tonks isn't there beside me, that tightness in my chest comes back." Harry said, sighing. "I just don't want to make a fool of myself and say something I shouldn't..."

"You won't. When the time is right, everything will just click. I'm sure it'll work out perfectly fine between the two of you."

"I hope so, Leon. I really, really hope so."

Getting up, Solieyu looked down at Harry and asked, "Should I tell the guys to be quiet when they come up?"

"Yeah. I think a good night's rest will do me some good. We've got a long day ahead of us. Wish those idiots had gone home. I was kinda hoping it'd just be the three of us, getting the Tower to ourselves. Woulda been fun." Harry said.

"I'm sure it would have been. I'll tell them, then. Goodnight, Harry."

"Staying up again?" Harry asked, cracking an eye open enough to watch his friend head for the door.

"Don't I always?"

"One of these days, I'm going to figure out when you manage to sleep."

"And if I don't need it?"

"...Then you wouldn't be entirely human."

"I never said I was, Harry."

With that, Solieyu slipped out of the second year boys' dorm room.

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"Crikey, this looks stupid." Said Tonks, frowning as her reflection showed Pansy Parkinson's face staring back at her.

"Who says '*crikey*' anymore?" Harry asked.

"I do! You don't look so hot yourself, Mr. Boy-Who-Lived."

"Yes, well, I'm dressed up as Slytherin's biggest sexual ambiguity problem, aren't I? How am I supposed to even act? Or talk? I haven't heard Blaise Zabini speak before." Harry grumped.

"Just sound like you have a head cold or something. If anyone asks, 'Potter' is in the hospital wing for some dumb reason and you'd rather deal with the annoyance than be in the same room as him." Said Tonks.

"I'm glad you're better at this than I am." Harry said, frowning as he wiggled his - or rather, Blaise's - nose. "This feels *weird*."

"You'll get used to it. C'mon, we'd better go. I'm sure Leon's gotten to the Great Hall by now." Tonks said.

Harry and Tonks had already charmed their robes to show Slytherin's colors. To anyone who passed by, it seemed as if Pansy and Blaise were heading somewhere. Which apparently wasn't as uncommon as the Ravensclaws originally thought. Via George, who had been more than happy to procure everything they needed to pull this infiltration plan off, they had gotten directions to the Slytherin common room. When asked why on earth he would even know, George told them that he and Fred enjoyed rigging things up nearby.

And so they set off. Their plan wasn't great, nor was it foolproof. Tonks estimated that they had roughly a half hour to get there, get in, talk to Malfoy, and escape. Harry just wasn't good enough to hold a different set of facial features for very long. It was calling it close, but it would have to do. It was too late to change the plans now, anyway.

Once they reached the entrance to Slytherin, Harry and Tonks exchanged a glance before speaking the password - "Mudbloods" - and gaining entrance.

To say the Slytherin common room was dreary was an understatement. The coldness from the lower corridors filtered through, chilling the inner room, despite the nearby fire's best attempts to keep the place warm. The furniture was similar to that in Ravenclaw, only it seemed... more rigid, somehow. Less comfortable. As Harry and Tonks stepped in and walked around, they realized that no one else was there at the moment.

"This is bad." Whispered Tonks.

"Yeah. We don't have time for something like this to happen..." Harry whispered back.

"Well... Let's sit down. We can spare around ten minutes here, total. So long as Malfoy shows up soon and doesn't prattle on endlessly, we should still be okay." Said Tonks, tugging Harry over towards the chairs nearest the fireplace.

The two sat and waited nearly five minutes before they heard footsteps. They looked over, worried about who it might be. Thankfully, it was Malfoy. Unfortunately, he had his two gorillas with him.

Malfoy stopped in mid-sentence to goyle to give Harry and Tonks a strange look. "How did you two beat us back?"

"Uh... shortcut." Said Tonks, trying to imitate Pansy's voice as best she could.

"...You sound a bit funny, Parkinson." Said Malfoy, sauntering over and leaning back against a nearby table. "Something wrong?"

"We were both hit by a couple weird spells from that big-headed Potter idiot and his friends." Said Tonks, turning her nose up. "We got them back, of course... But we overheard them talking about going to the hospital wing. I don't know about you, Draco, but I certainly wouldn't want to be stuck alone in a room with them."

Harry marvelled at his friend's acting ability, mentally noting that he would have to have a word with her later about calling him big-headed.

"Yes, well... I suppose you have a point." Said Malfoy airily. Looking over to Crabbe and Goyle, he gave a slight nod. Whatever this meant, it seemed to indicate that their services were no longer needed. The two headed off toward the staircase at the back of the room. To Harry's surprise, both sets of staircases appeared to head even further down.

Malfoy sighed, shaking his head. "Honestly, do those two fat idiots *have* to eat *all* the time? I nearly hexed their mouths off for getting crumbs on my robes. Mother had to import these from China. They cost more than those two combined."

"Oh, that's terrible, Draco." Fauned Tonks. "Well, now that you're here, let's talk a bit, shall we? Have you heard the latest rumors going around?"

Raising an eyebrow, Malfoy shrugged. "It depends. The latest rumor I heard had to do with Potter and that long-haired friend of his being found in a broom closet on the fifth floor."

Harry choked.

Malfoy sent him an odd look. "Problem, Zabini?"

"Nothing." Harry replied. "Still not feeling well. I, uh...hope those idiots get out of the hospital wing soon. I hate to go around sounding like I was related to Goyle all day."

"Yes, I can see where that would be annoying. Well, go on, Parkinson. What's the latest rumor?"

Tonks smiled and, lowering her voice, whispered, "We overheard Snape and McGonagall talking. Snape seems to think he knows who the Heir of Slytherin really is..."

Malfoy snorted. "If he did, he'd tell the rest of us, wouldn't you say?"

Tonks pouted slightly. "I suppose... *you* don't have any ideas on who it could be, do you?"

Making a face, Malfoy's eyes narrowed as he looked into the fire. "I've already told half the idiots here that I don't. It would be nice if someone started believing me. And father won't tell me anything, though I can tell he knows *something* about it. Mother wasn't any help, either. And she'll usually tell me things father doesn't want me to hear, if I ask."

Tonks exchanged a look with Harry and was about to say something to Malfoy again when she blinked and jerked back to look at Harry again. His nose had shifted back to normal. Eyes glancing aside at Malfoy quickly - he was still lost in the fire - Tonks mouthed 'nose!' at Harry, whose eyes widened.

"Uh... I think I should go check the hospital wing out now. If those idiots are still there, we'll hex them down the stairs." Harry said, covering his face with a hand. "I'm starting to feel worse."

"I'll go with you." Tonks said. "Just in case they decide to *try* cursing us again."

As the two disguised Ravenclaws stood, something happened that definitely was *not* a part of their plans. The entrance to the common room opened once more and someone came dashing in. His eyes glanced around quickly and, seeing only three fellow Slytherins, rushed over.

"And what's wrong with *you*, Nott?" Malfoy asked, snapping out of his daze.

"It's...it's happened again..." Panted Theodore Nott, leaning over and breathing heavily. "They just found them..."

"Them?" Asked Harry, around his hand.

"Yeah... we've been hit this time, Draco."

Malfoy's eyes darkened. "Show me."

Nott nodded, standing up straight again. "Pansy, Blaise, you two coming?"

"They need to go to the hospital wing, so I'm sure they'll see, anyway." Malfoy said. "Come on, let's get going."

As Malfoy and Nott headed for the entrance again, Nott began, "Well, I was coming back from the lake and there was some commotion in the Entrance Hall. Then someone upstairs screamed. Everyone ran up and..."

They were gone then, leaving Harry and Tonks in the Slytherin common room, alone. The two looked at each other, nodded, and began after the other two. As dangerous as it was, they needed to know who had been attacked this time. Whoever it was, it was apparently another Slytherin, judging from Nott's explanation.

As they ran along the dank corridors of the dungeons, Harry and Tonks ducked into an alcove to change their faces and robes back to normal. Harry was very thankful for this, as his face was mostly back to normal at that point, anyway. They then set off in a dead heat towards the Entrance Hall.

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"As you may have heard, two more victims have been found today." Said Dumbledore that night at dinner. Since so few students had stayed, everyone - staff included - was eating at a shortened version of one of the house tables.

"Millicent Bullstrode and our resident poltergeist have been placed in the hospital wing. While we are sure the mandrake brew will cure Miss Bullstrode, we are still a bit unsure of how to go about administering it to Peeves." Continued the headmaster, glancing at all the students present.

"What's going to happen if this keeps up?" Asked George Weasley, who was sitting across from Harry.

"I am afraid... we will have to close Hogwarts, Mr. Weasley." Replied Professor McGonagall, gravely.

Harry felt as if he had just been kicked in the chest. The infiltration had brought no new information to light, another attack had taken place during it, and Hogwarts might have to close if it all continued? That would mean returning to the Dursleys. If there was a fate worse than death, returning to Number Four was it.

"There's got to be something we can do..." Said the real Blaise Zabini, who was sitting down near Professor Snape. His eyes were narrowing and he had his elbows up on the table with his hands folded. "No one attacks Slytherin house and gets away with it..."

"Why don't get Professor Lockhart to investigate?" Tonks suggested dryly.

All eyes turned to the Defense professor, who was halfway into a large bite of pie. Blinking, he swallowed hard and gave a nervous chuckle. "Come now... We don't even know what it is that's causing the attacks. How could I possibly know what tracking method to use? I might use the wrong one, and then where would I be?"

"*Dead*, if we were lucky." Muttered Snape as he lifted his goblet.

"I'm sorry, Severus, I didn't quite get that." Said Lockhart, still smiling jovially as he turned to the Potions Master, who simply glared in return.

The rest of the meal was spent trying to work out just what could be done against the unknown menace. The Slytherins were all for hunting it down and killing it. No surprise there. George seemed to almost want to torture the whatever-it-was. Harry couldn't say as he blamed him. Ginny was sitting next to him, looking a bit pale. She didn't seem to be eating much. Probably thinking about Fred, too, Harry figured. Solieyu was quiet, though Harry knew he had to be feeling the same way George did. He knew that his friend missed the little oddball of Ravenclaw. Almost everyone seemed to, whether they admitted it or not. Several had stated how much quieter it was now that she wasn't around.

Harry and Tonks excused themselves, citing that they wanted to get an early start on the following day. Solieyu caught up to them as they were halfway up the main staircase.

"Well, *that* idea went balls-up." Tonks grumbled.

"What happened out there, Leon?" Harry asked. "Nott burst into the common room. We had already found out that Malfoy, as usual, was completely useless..."

"I had managed to charm a pair of oranges to fly around Pansy and Blaise, smashing into their heads every so often. I was trying to lure them away from the dungeons as much as I could. Thankfully, George came to help. I'm afraid I'm not terribly brilliant at causing a distraction." Said Solieyu.

"Yeah, you had one made for you, though." Tonks said, shaking her head.

"Indeed. I was one of the first at the scene. Bullstrode was laying face-down and had something pink in her hair. Looked like gum. Peeves was just sort of floating upside-down."

"How could they tell he had been attacked, too?" Harry asked.

"He hadn't made a snide comment or tried throwing water balloons at anyone in over a minute." Solieyu replied, dryly.

"Works for me. Go on." Harry said.

"Well, Dumbledore arrived shortly after I did. Then everyone in the general area seemed to pop out of the woodwork. Dumbledore levitated Bullstrode and Peeves to the hospital after that. He told Snape to grab Bullstrode's 'personal items,' which I'm afraid I didn't get a clear look at."

"Any odd feelings today?" Harry asked.

"I felt rather ill just before the attack happened, but... That isn't saying much, is it?"

The three were silent as they gave the password to Walter and entered the common room. None of the others were back yet. Flopping down on the couch in front of the fire, all they could do was stare at it as it flickered.

"Tomorrow," Harry said after awhile, "I'm going to the library. And I'm not coming out until I find every damned creature, artifact, and spell that can petrify both humans and poltergeists. I'm *not* going to be sent back 'home' because of this. I won't let whatever's doing this make me go back."

Leaning forward, Harry stared more intently into the flames. Tonks and Solieyu exchanged worried glances behind his back.

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Author's Notes: Oho! Another fun little sequence of are-they-real-or-not? dream bits! And yes, I'm quite aware of putting one of the same lines in again. It was entirely intentional. Again, I'll state that I may or may not use bits and pieces of things, but Harry is **STILL** not a Seer, nor will he ever **BE** one in this fic. So don't get uppity and I won't force something to get stuck in your craws.

Sorry this was later than I planned. Real life came up in a number of ways. As of July 2nd, however, I'll have a distinct lack of anything to do with my free time. My best friend will be moving in with his girlfriend, so I'll no longer be able to sit around and crack jokes and such with him most of the evenings. This, in turn, opens up a LOT of free time for me. Hopefully I'll be motivated now that I'm officially over the 'hump' in book 2. Ten more chapters are planned.

Sadly, as with most people who're reading this, Half-Blood Prince will officially put me off of doing much of ANYTHING for a few days around its release. Before AND after. I was spoiled about the death in book 5. I'm not going to make THAT mistake twice. No worries, though. I'll definitely have Chapter 12 out by then.

Um... I hope no one minded the fluff I just randomly decided to add. I figured it was Harry's turn to pull a sneak attack. Besides, I needed to place grounds for his worries. I don't have a lot of notes on the next chapter. Thankfully, a bit of improvisation on my part in this chapter **GIVES** me more to add. Only now I have to research spells and such that can petrify. Oh well. I'll figure it out later. It's four thirty-nine in the morning and I've been writing for a bit over an hour. I started at three thirty, saying I'd only write for half an hour. But I decided to get the damn chapter **DONE**. So um... Yeah. Next chapter's title is going to

be Valentine's Nightmare. Have fun imagining the stuff I'll be putting THERE.

And as a final, "I just finished editing this" note... I do hope I got all that nose bit right. It's been awhile since I did anything that required the inner workings of the human body, I'm afraid.

Chapter 12 – Valentine's Nightmare

"I *hate* Valentine's Day!" Harry hissed, stampeding his way past a couple of much older students as he made his way upstairs. His days had not been getting any better. In fact, they seemed to be getting even worse. His mood having dropped into some empty pit, Harry had been seen spending numerous days simply glaring at things for no obvious reason.

Of course, Tonks and Solieyu knew the reasons behind their friend's turn for the worse. All of the researching, all of the ideas, all of the time spent had turned up nothing so far. The puzzle pieces in Harry's mind were scattering further and further apart and he didn't like it one bit. It wasn't in Harry's nature to let something go, either, so he spent nearly every waking moment toiling over what he could have possibly missed.

The only person who could even pull him from one of his sour moods anymore was Tonks. Solieyu had tried once, but that had ended with the two Ravenclaws locked in a yelling match. Solieyu understood his friend's utter crankiness - he hated the fact that he, too, was unable to track down anything - he really thought Harry was being rather immature about the whole situation.

None of it mattered today, though. No, today was Valentine's Day. And that bloody great dolt of a Defense professor had gone and infested the castle. With dwarves. Dwarves in tutus. Unshaven male dwarves in tutus. Unshaven male dwarves in tutus that *sang*! No less than three had been on Harry's tail ever since he left Ravenclaw Tower. He had been hoping to escape into the Great Hall, but that only made it worse. By that time, two more had caught up to him.

So he had promptly pulled an about-face and was now racing towards the Raven's Nest as fast as he could. The dwarves had no chance on the stairs. At least, they didn't going up. Little buggers proved annoyingly fast going *down* them, as Harry had found out earlier.

Of course, George Weasley had thought the whole situation was hilarious. A small brigade of disgruntled short things wanting to sing to Harry? Pure comedy gold to the redhead! Harry had shot the Gryffindor a glare as he had made his hasty retreat from the Great Hall.

Going through the false wall to reach the spiral staircase, Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He looked over his shoulder and heard the marching feet of the dwarves come to a halt around where he had vanished. Gruff voices that Harry couldn't quite make out discussed something or another and then, as one, the dwarves pierced through the fake wall.

Harry let out a strangled cry and raced up the stairs as fast as he could. Practically leaping through the trap door at the top, Harry slammed it as he landed on the stone floor of the Nest, pulled his wand, and charmed the blasted thing to keep itself closed. Harry flopped down, somewhat exhausted, and waited. Eventually, the dwarves hit the trap door's underside. They pounded for a few minutes, ground out bits of their singing valentines, and finally - *finally* - turned and left.

Harry closed his eyes and slumped, sliding down and letting out a thoroughly relieved sigh. He was distracted from his relaxation when a strange noise from nearby caught his ear. Opening one eye, he tilted his head just to the right. There, not five feet away, was Tonks. Her eyes were watering and she looked to be biting down on her lower lip rather hard. Every so often, a stilted snort tried breaking through. And eventually the defense fell altogether. As Harry sat up to glare at the girl, Tonks keeled over sideways in laughter.

"It isn't funny!" Harry shouted. "Those damned things have been out for my blood all day!"

"I don't think your blood is what the senders of those valentines were after, Harry!" Squeaked Tonks, between giggles.

Harry glared. "Don't make me hire some first years to write a few *dozen* valentines to you, Nymmy. I'll do it, too."

"Don't call me Nymmy!" Tonks groused, pushing herself upright once more. "And you wouldn't *dare*."

"Oh *wouldn't* I?"

"Not unless you want to risk my wrath."

"Your wrath would be a welcome change of pace." Harry grumped, crossing his arms and leaning back against the wall.

"Aww. You just need some quiet time." Tonks said, crawling over and sitting next to him. "C'mon, Harry, loosen up!"

"Loosen up? After what I've been dealing with? How do you propose that I *do* that, exactly?"

Tonks thought for a moment before a wide grin formed. "Instead of assigning those firsties to write to me... make 'em write to Snape."

Harry snorted, despite his mood. "Good lord, no. They're already afraid of him. I'm not far behind them. I will pass the idea along to George before the day's over with, though."

"Aww, come on! It's be funny!"

"Sure it would... until Snape cuts out their hearts with a spoon." Harry muttered.

"Why a spoon?"

"Because it's *dull*, you twit. It'll hurt more."

Tonks smacked Harry on the arm. "*I'm* the twit. You're the one leading a parade of poorly-dressed magical creatures around the school."

"Touche." Harry grumped.

"C'mon. We have to go back to the Tower sooner or later." Tonks reasoned.

"...Alright. But if another of those creepy things comes at me, I'm kicking it as hard as I can."

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"Harry! Oi, Harry, wait up!"

Harry looked around, blinking when he saw George running up to him.

A few days had passed since the Valentine's Day Nightmare, and Harry was feeling much better now. But the expression the Weasley twin wore on his face made his rising mood begin to waver.

"Something wrong?" Harry asked, slowing his walk down to fall in step beside George.

"You seen Ginny?" George asked. "She hasn't been in our common room all day, the girls in her dorm say she wasn't around last night. The Fat Lady says she didn't see her come in *or* out lately..."

"Dunno... I haven't seen her, either. But I haven't been actively looking for her, either. ...She looking any better? No offense, but she looked like hell last I saw her. What's going on?"

George scrunched his face up. "I wish I knew, Harry. I don't like this, though. First Fred gets petrified, Ginny starts looking and acting really strange, and Ron's been positively nice..."

"That last one's something to take note of." Harry dryly remarked.

"Yeah, it is. I think it's because Ginny nearly hexed his bits off a few weeks ago because he was saying something bad about women or... something. I couldn't get either of them to explain it. Anyway... Look, mate, just keep an eye out for her, alright? If you *do* see her, tell her I'm looking for her."

Harry nodded. "If you find her first, lemme know. I'll see if I can't round Tonks and Leon up, get them to help, too."

"Thanks, Harry. Knew I could count on you!" George said, grinning as he sprinted off.

Harry watched him go, the gears in his mind turning slowly.

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Later that night, the four met up after dinner was over with. So far, none of them had seen the youngest Weasley. Nor had she turned up to eat. George said he had hopped into the kitchens and asked if any house elf saw her, to tell him. He was beginning to get really worried.

"Okay, okay, okay..." Harry began, raising his hands and frowning. "We can't keep going around at random. Isn't working. This castle's huge. George, is there *anything* you haven't told us?"

George looked as if he were about to speak, but shook his head.

"George."

"..." George sighed. "Yeah, okay. There is, but it isn't important, alright? It's just... another source of mine. Only it didn't turn up anything important, either."

"...Alright. I'm going to trust you. You have no reason to lie to us, anyway." Harry said. "We need to go floor by floor. George, are there any shortcuts up to the seventh floor?"

George nodded.

"Good. Leon, head with him. You're good at sniffing things out." Harry said, smirking at the slight glare he received. "Me and Tonks will start down here and work our way up. Let's meet in the library. Half up, half down. And if we don't see her, we'll head to the dungeons after. Any objections?"

No one spoke, so Harry nodded. "Right. Let's get going, then."

"Don't forget to check the hospital wing." Solieyu commented as he and George set off.

"Somehow, I don't think George is being truthful with us... But it's his sister, so if he wants to withhold information, it's his call." Harry said after they had disappeared.

"Yeah, he was acting weird. Wonder what his 'source' is." Tonks wondered aloud as they set off up the marble staircase.

"Dunno. But he seemed like he trusts it, whatever 'it' may be." Harry said. "Come on. This is gonna take awhile."

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Nearly half an hour later, Harry and Tonks were only just entering the second floor. Harry was wondering how the others were doing in their from-the-top-down search.

Rounding a corner, Harry shivered.

"What is it?" Tonks asked.

"Not sure... Just got a chill down my back." Harry said, looking around. Seeing nothing, he shrugged. "I guess it was nothing."

"Rarely is something 'nothing' when you're involved."

"Yeah, I've noticed that." Harry muttered, rounding a corner and immediately stepping into what he thought was a puddle of water.

"...I hate when we're right." Harry sighed. It wasn't a puddle. Rather, the whole corridor they had turned down seemed flooded. Turning to look at Tonks, he found that she was scowling something fierce. "...Tonks? What's up?"

Tonks pointed. "It's coming from Myrtle's bathroom."

"...Would you care to run that by me again?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Myrtle. Moaning Myrtle. She's a ghost who only hangs around this one bathroom. All us girls know about it... though most of us learned the hard way not to take a trip in *there* if we needed to go."

"So she's a ghost. What's so bad about that? The house ghosts aren't that bad. Peeves is a poltergeist, so he doesn't count, and--"

"She's different. Come on, I'll show you." Tonks said, taking Harry by the hand and leading him down the corridor and into the girls' bathroom.

Harry followed, still not seeing what the big deal was. Not a minute after they had entered, however, he was ready to leave. Moaning Myrtle was no mere ghost. Rather, she was a spectral entity capable of annoying the slime out of anyone who went near her. This particular day, it seemed Myrtle was especially upset. As Tonks and Harry waded into the bathroom, they heard sobbing coming from one of the stalls. Harry gave Tonks a look, which she nodded at.

After a long, and *horribly* boring, conversation, the two Ravenclaws saw what had caused Myrtle to sob uncontrollably... and most likely what flooded the general area. A black diary, old and tattered, had been flung into one of the toilets. It was too big to flush, and the way it had been lodged had seriously been gumming up the works, so to speak.

After levitating the diary up and out of the toilet and applying a few cleansing charms to it, Harry and Tonks hurried out of Myrtle's bathroom.

"I told you." Tonks said.

"No, *you* told me she was a ghost. *That* thing was more annoying than Peeves!" Harry argued. "So, aside from being a diary, does that thing look important or anything to you? I'm not so great with magical books and stuff yet..."

"Dunno. All the pages are blank, though." Tonks said, flipping through the diary's worn-out pages. "I'd say it's magical, yeah. Why else would someone toss out an unused diary?"

Harry shrugged. "Because it looks like it's going to fall apart?"

"Nah. Magical books are charmed to keep together for a *long* time, Harry." Tonks said. "That this one is so old-looking is probably good indication that it's *really* old. I dunno by how long, but I'd say long before either of us were born."

"So... someone throws a magical diary away. Now the question is *why* they did so."

Tonks didn't have an answer for that one, so Harry continued.

"The choice of locations is fairly obvious. Whoever tossed it - and I'm going to go ahead and assume it was a girl - must have known about Myrtle's bathroom. She chose it because of its reputation for rarely getting any visitors..." Harry said, gnawing on the corner of his lower lip. "Something isn't right here."

"Maybe she just didn't want it anymore. It happens everywhere... and a lot more often than you'd think." Tonks reasoned.

"This isn't everywhere." Harry said, glancing over at his friend quickly. "Last year, we nearly got eaten by a three-headed dog and I was nearly killed by a guy who had my parents' killer's *face* growing out of the back of his head. I think it's safe to assume magical items aren't just thrown away like that... especially around here."

"But why'd whoever-it-is try to *flush* it? It's much too big for that..." Tonks said, sizing the diary up. "She must've known that it would get stuck."

"Maybe she wanted someone to find it..." Harry said, slowly. His eyes were narrowed and he was gnawing at his lip even faster. "...Oh, damn."

"Oh, damn?"

"Tonks... I think this has something to do with what's happening. And if I'm right... ...Dammit all! Come on, we need to find George!" Harry said, taking off in a dead sprint.

Tonks watched him, confused, before taking off after him. "Harry, wait up!"

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"GEORGE! Oi! George!" Harry called out.

They had made it up to the fifth floor in a matter of minutes and, after a brief search, found the Weasley twin checking random rooms along a corridor.

"What's up, you two? You look like you've just seen a ghost. ...Bloody Baron been chasing you?"

"It would've been better than Myrtle." Harry muttered.

"What was that?" Asked George.

"Nothing. George, look... You know how weird things are happening again this year?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. It's Hogwarts, mate. If something weird *didn't* happen, *then* you'd have reason to worry." George said, grinning crookedly.

"We found this diary while we were searching the second floor." Said Tonks, holding up the book. "It was stuffed in a toilet in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. The whole ruddy hallway was flooded. Myrtle said she didn't know whose it was, since she was further down in the pipes and having a sob. Then Harry here took off running, saying we needed to find *you*."

Harry ignored the glare Tonks was shooting him. "George, look... Have you seen Ginny writing in something like this?"

George thought for a moment before shaking his head. "Can't say as I have, Harry. Why?"

"Just a hunch I have." Harry said, eyes unfocusing. "It's just strange that someone would throw something like this out... it's like she - we're guessing it's a girl since we found the diary in a girl's bathroom, after all - was trying to hastily get rid of it... almost as if it were cursed or something. And... well, no offense, George, but Ginny hasn't been looking that healthy lately. And you've said yourself that she's been acting strangely, right?"

"I'm not sure I like where this is going." George said, nodding slowly.

"Neither do I." Harry said. He turned, taking the diary from Tonks and handing it to George. "I have a feeling that Ginny's going to show up soon. Do me a favor. Show this diary to her and gauge her reaction. Whatever you do, *don't* let her get ahold of it. I want you to bring it back to us later... I'm going to head for the library, see if I can find any information on magical diaries that would be useful."

George nodded, taking the book and inspecting it. "This really does look old. Mum has a few things from our great grandmother that look nicer than this."

"Bet they weren't lobbed in a toilet, though." Tonks dryly commented.

"Actually..." George began.

"Look, anecdotes later." Harry said, rolling his eyes. "Just head back to your common room, stake the place out. If you can, rope Ron and Hermione into it. We'll keep a lookout for her as well and we'll send her to you if we spot her."

"Alright." George said. "Anything else?"

"No... not yet." Harry said. "Though I'm starting to get a very grim idea of what *could* be happening."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Look, you two... I haven't really told anyone this, but... well, you know that time I couldn't help myself and hexed that ponce Lockhart under the desk?"

"How could I forget? It was the best Defense class this year." Tonks said, grinning.

"While I was suffering through detention with him, I heard something. Something... I dunno... *odd*. It was a voice that was coming from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. I managed to get away from Lockhart and followed the sound of the voice for awhile... but I wound up at a dead-end. After fishing the diary out of Myrtle's toilet, something occurred to me..." Harry said.

"...The pipes." Tonks said, eyes widening.

"The pipes." Harry echoed, nodding. "I think that whatever's petrifying people is getting around through the plumbing. I just wish I knew how *big* the pipes were so I could see about working out what the hell it could *be*."

"Great. Now I'm not going to want to take a nice leisurely trip to the bathroom anymore." George piped in. "Thanks for that."

"It's not like either of *us* like the idea." Harry said. "But even *that* doesn't make much sense... I mean, it'd have to be small enough to come out of the biggest hole in a bathroom... And that'd have to be the one in a toilet, wouldn't it?"

"So you think we may have a little whatsit swimming through the plumbing, popping up occasionally to turn people to *stone*?" Tonks asked.

"Something like that. There are still too many damn pieces of the puzzle that aren't *fitting*." Harry said, sounding clearly frustrated. "It's like the school is *trying* to tell me what's going on, but it won't be direct with me."

"Sounds like Dumbledore." George commented.

"Yeah, it does." Agreed Harry. "That's what bugs me. Anyway, I'll try and figure this out. You go see about Ginny." He paused for a minute, then asked, "Hey, where'd Leon get off to, anyway? Shouldn't he be here?"

George shrugged. "Said he was feeling sick. He didn't look very good, so I told him to go on to the hospital wing. Heard him muttering something about blood as he wandered off."

"Blood..." Harry echoed, frowning. "...Okay, thanks. We'll go look for him."

"Right-o." George said. "Be careful, you two."

"You too, George." Tonks said, watching the redhead jog off down the hall. Once he was out of earshot, she turned to Harry and asked, "Do you really think some creature's living in the plumbing?"

"It would explain how it gets around without being seen." Harry said. "But it still needs to be large enough to *escape* the bathroom..."

"And you think that's where Ginny might come into play?"

"I don't know." Sighed Harry. "I just don't know."

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Author's Notes: Obvious quote! Well...changed a little to fit a bit better. But everyone should get it. I've got a few more Rickman quotes I may or may not give to Snape. The Metatron's are going to be the most amusing. I have a great one lined up for the scene before our team goes into the Chamber with Lockhart...

I know the chapter's kinda short, and given the length it took to write it, I apologize. I'm sure you all know the infamous Page 606 Rumor by now. Stupid bloody twits and their spoilers. It *seems* real. And if it's not, it's the best hoax ever. Ach. I like the thought of an evil Snape. I honestly do. So I'm hoping the rumor's true in a way. ...I also think that Rowling's getting a bit Tolkien-esque with the chapter titles this time around. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing, though.

I've had to compress two chapters into this one. And, as you can see, Smart!Harry is working things out faster than his canonical counterpart did. I'm still hoping to get to 20 chapters, but it may just not happen. Especially if I keep gluing chapters together like this. I couldn't help it, though, since the Chapter 12 and Chapter 13 ideas were just paper thin on their own. I needed to fill things out with some detectivework on Harry's part.

If all goes well, the next chapter will include Harry's trip into the diary, along with either the SETUP for going into the forest or the actual journey there. It all depends. But it'll be out after Half-Blood Prince. But that's a given, isn't it? I've debated whether or not I should even be uploading this now, since I'm sure others are trying to avoid

leaked spoilers, too. But I said I'd update before HBP came out, and by god, I am. It's a big short, but it was also an uneventful chapter as a whole, logic and deductions aside.

Here's to hoping the rumors are false, Snape isn't a dickweed, and the headmaster's livelihood.

Chapter 13 – Dark Secrets

It was a dreary day in early March. Dark clouds littered the skies over Hogwarts' grounds, threatening to dump a heavy amount of rain down. Some time had passed since Harry had passed the strange diary along to George Weasley, hoping he would confront his little sister about it. Unfortunately, Ginny seemed to be doing everything in her power to avoid her older brother.

George finally got sick of this treatment and snuck out of History of Magic one day, looming outside the Charms classroom until Ginny emerged. When she did, he grabbed her by the arm and, against her protests, tugged her off into an empty classroom. Once there, he had pulled the book out and demanded to know if there was anything going on that he should know about.

"When she saw it... she looked like someone had died." George murmured. "She shook her head, slipped around me, and took off running. I tried to catch her, but she's too damn fast. I think you're right, Harry. I think she *is* involved in whatever's going on."

Harry sighed. The two were sitting down near the lake, despite the weather conditions. It was the best place to talk without worrying about any eavesdroppers. "I was afraid of that." He said, shaking his head slowly. "I think she's been helping whatever's been petrifying people."

"But *why*?" George asked, slamming the diary down onto the ground between the two of them.

"I dunno. Maybe whatever it is has some sort of control over her. If that's the case, it's a simple matter of figuring out what it is. Then we can hunt it down, kill it, and hopefully that'll fix Ginny up." Harry said.

"Hopefully..." George echoed, drearily. "...You had any luck working out what kinds of creatures can turn people to stone?"

"Yeah. Only none of them really make sense. At least, not unless the plumbing is massive in size. It would have to be. There are very few small creatures that can do that sort of thing. Only... I didn't see

anything about mind control listed for any of them..." Harry said, narrowing his eyes. "There's something missing still. I know there is."

"Well I hope you hurry and figure out what." George said, scowling.

"Yeah. So do I." Harry said. Then, feeling himself get hit on the head by a large rain droplet, he added, "Let's get back inside."

Harry grabbed the diary and tucked it away in his robes, walking with George back up to the school. "I'm going to take it up to the Nest later and try writing in it. I'm going to have both Tonks and Leon nearby, just in case anything should happen to me. We'll track you down if it gives us anything useful to go on."

"Thanks, Harry." Said George, running a hand back through his hair as a few random drops of water splashed onto it. "We - Ron and me, I mean - really do appreciate what you're doing to help..."

Harry grinned crookedly, pushing one of the front doors of the school open and stepping inside. "Don't be thanking me. I haven't done anything yet. The most I've done is put some good, solid Ravenclaw thinking into things."

"Still... the sooner I get Fred back and Ginny stops acting weird, the better. I'm a bit worried, to tell you the truth. I just have this odd feeling in the pit of my stomach that something's going to happen tonight."

"Oh? Why's that?" Harry asked.

"Because..." George said, looking up at the ceiling and smiling mirthlessly, "There's going to be a full moon tonight."

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"Okay, you two. I'm going to flip this stupid thing open and start writing. If *anything* should happen to me... I dunno, *do* something." Harry said, sitting cross-legged in the Raven's Nest. Solieyu and Tonks were sitting nearby. Both had their wands out.

"Real eloquent, Harry." Tonks commented.

"Shut up! I'm nervous, that's all. Never fiddled with something like this before. So I just open it and start writing, huh?" Harry asked.

"Pretty much." Tonks replied. "After a minute, your text'll fade. If anything happens after that, you're in trouble. *Normal* wizarding diaries just cause everything you write to vanish until you want to see it again. And no one else can read it. So I doubt we'll be finding anything out about the thing's previous owner. But it's worth a shot if you're still feeling so uppity over it."

"Leon, any commentary *you'd* like to throw in?" Harry asked, voice toneless.

"Nothing. I can sense something odd about it, but it's very faint." Solieyu said, shrugging as he leaned back against the wall.

"Lovely." Harry said, opening the diary to somewhere about the middle, taking a quill and some ink from his bag. "Well... here goes nothing."

As Harry wrote, the other two watched. After his initial writing, the text indeed faded out. But then something odd happened - new text appeared. Text that, for all intents and purposes, seemed to be greeting Harry. Tonks and Solieyu exchanged a confused glance at this, but Harry was too focused to notice it. He continued to have a conversation with the inanimate object for a few minutes.

Then light flared in the Nest, causing Tonks and Solieyu to shield their eyes. When the light faded, and they peered out, Harry was gone. Tonks leapt to her feet and quickly ran out and around the tower's outer circle once.

"He isn't out there!" She cried as she came to a halt back inside.

"He didn't leave through the trapdoor, either." Solieyu said, kneeling next to the diary. "Tonks. You don't suppose...?"

Walking over and squatting down next to him, Tonks stared at the diary, as well. "You think he's... what, that he's *in* the diary? Don't be barmy."

"Well, if you have a more plausible idea, I'd love to hear it." Solieyu said. When Tonks didn't reply, he continued, "It seemed to be talking back to Harry. That alone means there's something odd about the thing. That it seemed to *swallow* our friend means that it's probably hiding more than the writings of angsty wizards and witches..."

"Yeah, but... what do we do now? Do we just sit and wait for him to return? Should we go find Dumbledore?" Tonks asked, squirming. "Do you think Dumbledore could even *do* something...?"

"I'm not sure, Tonks. I'm really not. I guess this is what I was sensing. But if it was enchanted to suck someone in, it should have been practically oozing a magical aura of sorts... I barely sensed a thing." Solieyu said, obviously annoyed at having a book get the better of him.

"I didn't sense anything." Tonks pouted. "How come you're so much better at that, huh?"

"Natural instinct." Solieyu replied, leaning over the diary to get a better look at it. There was nothing on the opened pages to indicate anyone had been writing in it, much less a hint as to what was said. "It was important to my mother that I learn to sense magical auras on things. Especially after the acci--"

Whatever Solieyu was about to say, he was cut off as the book suddenly flared with light again. This caught both Ravenclaws by surprise and sent them onto their backsides, covering their eyes and hissing from the sudden brightness. There was an audible 'oomph!' from nearby and, when they could manage to open their eyes again, it was to see a very confused-looking Harry sitting where he had been.

For a moment, none of the trio spoke. Then, Harry frowned and stared down at the diary. "Did I...?"

"Uh-huh." Solieyu answered, rubbing at his eyes and scowling slightly.

"How long was I gone...?"

"Not long." Tonks said. "Five, maybe ten minutes?"

"Really?" Harry said, brow creasing further. "Felt like a few hours had passed. This diary was owned by some guy named Riddle, originally. Looked a bit like me, only taller... I saw him in there. It was like I was watching a replay of events that he wrote down. I could walk around and hear everything within distance of Riddle himself, but I couldn't interact with anything..."

"It's like a Pensieve?" Solieyu asked.

"A what?" Said Harry.

"A Pensieve." Solieyu repeated. "My mother owns one. You draw memories out of your head with your wand and place them into this bowl of silver liquid... it helps to sort your thoughts, apparently. You can go into them and 'relive' them in a way."

"...Sounds about right, then. But... I saw a good number of things. Did you two know Dumbledore was a redhead? George'll get a kick out of that. And I saw Hagrid when he was younger, too. It seemed... like Riddle was catching him..."

"Catching him? Doing what?" Tonks asked.

"I'm not sure. That one was a bit fuzzy. But... remember the writing on the wall? It mentioned a Chamber of Secrets? Seems like it was opened before. And attacks like the ones now happened back then, too." Harry said. "It got so bad that one student was killed... Riddle seemed to think Hagrid was the one who opened this Chamber thing and released whatever was attacking the students... Hagrid kept denying it, but... there was something in that room with him. Only I didn't get a good look at it since it was so damn *dark* in there..."

"So... what now?" Asked Solieyu. "Do we confront Hagrid? Ask him what happened back... whenever this was written?"

"I don't know. I get really uncomfortable around him..." Harry said, glancing off.

"Hagrid's the one who delivered Harry to the Dursleys when he was a baby." Tonks supplied.

"Ahh..."

"I guess we should, but... I think we should wait. I think we should wait and I think we should keep an eye on Hagrid instead of confronting him outright. You know how he is - if he knew that we knew something, he'd go straight to Dumbledore. And since Dumbledore seems keen on trying to cover things up, I'm willing to bet we'll be kept from figuring anything else out. No, I think we should lay low for now..." Harry said.

"And if there's another attack?" Solieyu asked.

"Then we'll confront him. You've heard the rumors, right? That he was expelled? What if he was expelled for releasing whatever caused the attacks?"

"Why would Dumbledore hire him onto the staff, though, if that was the case?" Asked Tonks.

"Why did Dumbledore hire a two-faced man and Snape? Who knows why the man does anything he does." Harry grumbled. "All I know is that he isn't entirely trustworthy, either. The headmaster's keeping his fair share of secrets, too. And since the staff obviously isn't trying to work out what's going on, we need to. We can't just let things continue on like they did back in Riddle's time. They were threatening to close the school, you know..."

"Really?"

"Mm. Riddle was talking to the previous headmaster about it all." Harry said, closing the diary and looking at the tiny letters inscribed on the front. "An 'o' has faded out. It isn't 'T. M. Riddle,' it's 'Tom Riddle.' Since Tom here talked to Dumbledore, he *must* know what's going on this time. So why isn't he *doing* anything? Dammit all, when one piece of the puzzle falls into the place, two more go missing..."

"So, aside from observing Hagrid, are we planning to do anything?" Asked Tonks.

"Not yet. I have a lot to think over. If what George said was true, Ginny was writing in this previously. Only I don't get why it would

cause her to act so strangely and *look* so awful. Riddle didn't seem like a bad guy... a bit odd, in a way, but not bad." Harry said, frowning.

"Maybe he wasn't so good with girls?" Tonks offered.

"I don't think so... he was wearing a badge or something on his robes. So he was either a prefect or Head Boy. I was too busy taking in everything else to pay closer attention. Didn't seem like that big a detail, anyway. You'd need good people skills for a position like that." Said Harry.

"Perhaps Ginny Weasley was asking Riddle advice, and it turned sour?" Solieyu offered. "Most men aren't known for giving the sagest of advice about women, after all."

"Maybe... but to throw it in Myrtle's toilet? I dunno. I don't think love troubles are the foremost thing on an eleven year old girl's mind..." Harry said, shaking his head. "I dunno. I can't work it out."

"...Well..." Tonks began, staring at the diary again. "You thought Ginny was helping whatever it is out of the bathrooms and stuff, right? ...What if Riddle was giving her advice about that? Or trying to get her to stop?"

Harry tilted his head, then sighed. "I dunno. I think I need to sleep on it. This whole situation's giving me an awful headache. Either of you know any useful spells to make something like that go away?"

Solieyu prodded Harry in the head with his wand twice, murmured something under his breath, then leaned back on his arms again. Within a few seconds, the pounding between Harry's eyes subsided.

"Thanks. Where'd you learn that?" Harry asked, rubbing his forehead.

"My mother taught it to me." Solieyu replied, simply.

"Ahh. You'll have to teach me sometime." Harry said. "...C'mon, you two. Let's go tell George what we found out. Maybe some part of it will make sense to *him*."

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Harry sighed. It was too quiet, even for the Ravenclaw common room. Harry liked it when there was peace, but... this was different. A feeling of dread filled Harry when *this* type of silence fell over the castle. It was as if something was about to happen and it needed just enough build-up before it could begin.

As he had been experiencing quite enough 'excitement' lately, Harry got up and headed out of the Tower. Whatever was about to happen, he wanted no part of it. Tonks was off in her dorm, studying frantically for an upcoming Herbology test on fanged plants and how to treat their bites, so he was on his own. Solieyu, as usual, was off in parts unknown, which still irked Harry to no end.

As Harry wandered the corridors of Hogwarts, he thought back to how they had reported their findings back to George. George seemed quite interested in Harry's bizarre adventures in the diary, to the point of wanting to inspect it to try and work out the spells on it. But Harry had said it wouldn't be good if it was in Ginny's general vicinity. She might try to do something to it.

So Harry had taken it to his dorm room in the Tower and tossed it in his trunk, figuring that she'd never be able to get at it there, of all places. He planned to try writing in it further, but he was having difficulty in deciding what *to* write. Tom Riddle didn't seem like the type to lie, but it was just a diary. He felt odd just having a conversation with an inanimate object as it was. To try and question an inanimate object from years before about current events... well, that was just outright stupid.

Nonetheless, it was worth *some* kind of shot. The diary had held information about the Chamber being opened in the past, after all. Rubbing at the back of his neck, up near his skull, Harry sighed. Despite Solieyu's wand work, he was still having random aches and pains. That, or it was his 'danger sense,' as Tonks once called it, going off. She had started calling it that recently, due to the fact that every time Harry started to warn that something bad might happen, something bad *did* happen.

Personally, Harry felt like he was cursed for the very same reason.

After what felt like about an hour or so of aimless meandering, Harry finally decided to go back to the Tower to see if anything had randomly blown up. Of course, he immediately regretted thinking that, as the last thing he wanted was for something bad to happen in his own House. The last thing he expected to see was a rain of paper as he re-entered the common room.

Blinking, Harry stared around curiously. A handful of people were around, watching the paper flying about. The tear of paper caused Harry to jerk his head off in one direction. And there, to his horror, was Terry Boot. With Riddle's diary. Ripping pages out and slinging them up into the air.

Avoiding loose pages scattered on the floor with a quickness honed from dodging punches by a handful of his cousin's goon friends, Harry was across the room and tackling Terry to the floor in an instant. Without thinking, and without questioning, Harry promptly slammed his fist into Terry's nose, causing an awful cracking noise. Harry was about to throw a second to get one of Terry's eyes when a pair of seventh years hoisted him up, despite his protests.

"What the hell are you doing?" Harry yelled, glaring down at Terry, who was now clutching his broken nose.

"Getting even!" Terry spat, glaring back up at Harry.

"Getting even? For *what*?" Harry cried, breaking free of the seventh years' grip on him and grabbing for the diary. It was about half as filled as before now.

"What you and 'Nymmy' did to me before Halloween! But I bet you don't even remember that, do you?" Terry growled, getting to his feet and wobbling slightly.

"Actually, I *do* remember, and I hardly see how ripping up an old diary in the common room is suitable revenge for it!" Harry growled back.

"Oh, I had other reasons for doing it besides my revenge," Terry said, smirking strangely.

"Other reasons...?" Harry repeated, narrowing his eyes. "*What* other reasons?"

"Oh, like I'm going to tell you." Terry said. "Besides, I need to get to the hospital wing. Thanks for giving me such a convenient way out, Potter."

Harry tried lunging again as Terry quickly walked out, but one of the seventh years grabbed at his arm again. Scowling, Harry instead went about collecting up the scattered pages of Riddle's diary.

"What's all the noise? I'm *trying* to stu-- Harry, what happened?"

Looking over his shoulder, Harry saw Tonks walking in, her eyes darting around the scene. With another scowl, he said, "Terry decided he'd be funny, getting revenge for what we did to him before Halloween. And, he claimed, there were *other* reasons for it."

"Were is the little sod, I'll punch him!" Tonks said, walking over to help Harry grab up pages.

"I got to him first this time." Harry said, holding up his right hand to show Tonks how red his knuckles were. "Right in the nose. He had to go off to see Madam Pomfrey. And if *those* two," Harry indicated the seventh years, who were back to chatting on the couch, "hadn't stopped me, I would've gotten another shot or two in."

After gathering the pages back up, Harry and Tonks went to the second year boys' dorm, where Harry found Solieyu stretched out in bed.

"Now when did *you* get up here?" Harry asked, glaring.

"I've *been* up here." Solieyu replied, sourly.

"Didn't think to stop Terry, then?"

"Stop him from what?"

"Getting the bloody diary out of my trunk, that's what!" Harry yelled.

"I've been asleep." Said Solieyu.

"Since when do *you* sleep?" Harry asked, crawling onto his own bed with Tonks following behind.

"Shut up." Solieyu said, sighing as he sat up. "So what happened?"

"Well, after Terry got the diary right from under your nose," Harry began, sending a glare at his friend, "he went down and tore half of it up. It's a good thing I got back when I did. Broke his nose with a single punch, too."

"So I noticed." Muttered Solieyu.

"Noticed? How could you-- ...No, I'm not going to bother asking anymore. You'll never give me a straight answer, anyway." Harry said, shaking his head.

"If I hadn't been given a potion by Madam Pomfrey, I probably *would* have heard and stopped him. But I only just woke up a few minutes ago. Probably due to all the noise downstairs." Solieyu said, sending Harry's earlier glare back at him.

"He was ripping up our only *big* clue to this mess!" Harry flailed. "If he had complete des--OWW! Tonks, what was *that* for?"

Tonks peered at Harry through narrowed eyes. "You're being noisy. We've got more important things to do. I know I have things other than your little annoying bicker-fight on my mind."

"Didn't have to hit me." Harry mumbled.

After awhile, they had decided to just spell the pages back together. But that didn't seem to work. Whenever they tried to use '*Reparo*' on it, the pages started to go back to where they belonged, but promptly slipped back out again. None of them could figure out why. In the end, they decided to simply tape the pages back in and leave it at that. They would have to keep usage to a minimum, so Harry's further writing experiments were flushed down the toilet like the diary had almost been. He was pretty sure that the magic in the pages had been nullified once they had been torn out.

And, after a quick test, (due to Solieyu's insistance) Harry's theory proved to be true. Harry couldn't simply open the book from the back and write on the last page, either,as Terry had ripped an equal amount from both ends. The only safe spot was the middle, and none of them were eager to re-tape the rest of the pages in should the tape decide to give.

Settling on keeping the diary hidden under his invisibility cloak, and thankful that Terry hadn't found *that*, Harry groaned. "Every time I think things can't get any worse, they *do*."

"So stop thinking." Solieyu said, moving back to his bed and laying down again. After bringing an arm up to cover his eyes, he added, "Sic George on him. Ron's settled down, hasn't he? Maybe Terry will learn to stop being an idiot after he gets pranked enough."

"You're condoning us pranking Terry?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"He's an idiot. And far, *far* too loud for my liking. ...Perhaps George knows a good, strong silencing charm." Solieyu said, shrugging with one shoulder.

"Perhaps George knows a good, strong charm to keep Terry's hands attached to his butt." Tonks mimicked, scowling. "Little git."

"Perhaps George knows a good way to get him re-Sorted. What's he doing in Ravenclaw? He's dumber than the Hufflepuff firsties..." Harry said, rubbing at his temples.

"We should be so lucky." Solieyu said.

"Well, I guess we should think about visiting Hagrid, after all." Harry said after a few moments of silence. "Can't properly write in the diary unless I want to recollect and tape the pages back in..."

"Might as well." Tonks said. "Really, we don't have anything to lose from it, right? You'll just have to take a deep breath and stick it out, chief."

"Yeah..." Harry said, flopping back. "Well... we all might as well try to get a good night's sleep..."

"Danger sense?" Tonks questioned, smiling slightly.

"Don't you have Herbology stuff to be studying?" Harry asked through half-shut eyes.

"Crap! I totally forgot about that!" Tonks said, leaping off of Harry's bed and heading for the door. "Hex that idiot Boot's bed to bite his bits or something!"

And with that, the currently blue-haired girl was gone.

"I can only imagine Pomfrey's face if she had to treat an injury like *that*." Harry said. "...And it's disgusting. Dear Merlin, kill it with fire."

Solieyu snorted. "Get some rest."

"I can't. Every time I close my eyes now, I see a half-naked Terry Boot holding bits of himself out to the school nurse."

"...Thanks, now I can't close *my* eyes, either."

"Remind me to have a little talk to Tonks about mental imagery sometime." Harry said, sighing as he shut his eyes and shuddered.

"Noted."

"...So, you really not going to tell me why you were sleeping at this hour?"

"Nope."

"Alright. Just asking."

"Noted."

Opening an eye long enough to glare at Solieyu, Harry sprawled out. A visit to Hagrid's hut. As if everything else going on hadn't been enough. Now Harry would finally have to be in the presense of the man that had delivered him to the Dursleys. It might have been

Dumbledore's call, and Harry would always resent the headmaster for it, but it had been Hagrid that had actually picked him up and brought him to Privet Drive.

For some reason, Harry didn't think he would survive if he tried punching *Hagrid* in the nose.

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Author's Notes: *HALF-BLOOD PRINCE SPOILER-ISH STUFF FOLLOWS.*

Rowling can bite me. Lupin x Tonks as canon my ass. Love how she literally pulled that one out of *her* ass. And making Fleur so stropky and unlikable! Good god, I didn't care so much about what happened with Bill or that the Page 606 thing turned out to be true... But FOUR pairings out of the blue was a BIT much. I'm REALLY not looking forward to rewriting Book 6. I may just go with my original plans for Book 6 (Flying Citadel of Azkaban, anyone?) instead of going down the bland, uninspired, and wholly boring drek that is Half-Blood Prince.

Can a writer make her own characters out-of-character? Doesn't that break some fundamental laws of physics or something? God, no one was in-character in HBP. I officially hate HBP more than Chamber. And you guys have seen me bitching here, you should know my deep, seething hatred for Chamber by now. Guh. What do you guys think? Canonical rewrite with the laughably silly videogame plot of the horcruxes (if Harry gets 100 galleons, does he win a free man, too?) or Flying Citadel?

Oh, and if you guys haven't done so yet, check my profile. The R-Series has official fanart now! I'm strangely bouncy about it. I guess I never thought I'd ever write something that someone would consider good enough to spend time and effort on art for. But I'm happy, nonetheless. It's a scene from chapter 1 of book 1 and I thought it turned out really nice.

Edit for fixing the formatting: FFN has decided that I entered the URL multiple times for some reason. I fixed it, but it may still show as four or five pastes of the same URL. Just for reference.

As for this chapter... I figured it was pointless to rewrite the scenes of meeting Myrtle and the trip into the diary. I really have nothing to add to either of those, so keeping them like I did prevents boredom all around, I felt. Things are about to pick WAY the hell up, though. Next chapter will be part 1 of another two-part chapter. Maybe. You know how I am. I may just have one BIG chapter with everything I want in it. No matter which route happens, Aragog WILL appear in Chapter 14. So... yeah.

My feelings on Half-Blood Prince have petered out. I was a ranting, raving mess when I finished because I thought it was just so damned STUPID as a whole. And not just because Rowling decided to cement two saw-it-coming couples and two random ones into the foundation. Though Harry's RANDOM as hell feelings for Ginny flaring to life was odd. As was Harry picking up on Ron x Hermione early on. It all had NO build-up. I've read better fanfics than HBP. And with any luck, I'll continue to do so.

Make no mistake, dear readers. I WON'T fall into the same hackneyed plots Rowling has. Horcruxes will play no part of my end of the story which, as I've mentioned elsewhere, has already been written. I know how my story ends, and I have no desire to change it. So I guess after Order, I'll be going AU no matter which route I take. Bleh... Order was so good. What HAPPENED?

Chapter 14 – Howling in the Darkness

"I see it in your eyes, I feel it in your touch, I taste it from your lips..." Harry half-sung, half-muttered under his breath as he thumbed through yet another book on large, dark creatures that fit the description he was looking for. He had it narrowed down to only a handful of possibles... but none of them sounded like the type of thing he'd personally want to stare down. But things looked more and more inevitable as time passed. Dumbledore obviously wasn't doing anything to stop the creature. So, like with Quirrell in his previous year, it would be the job of Harry and his friends to deal with the problem.

Or, at least, he and Tonks would be acting. Harry wasn't so sure about Solieyu. A single day had passed since they had last talked, but it looked as if the other boy had been put through some sort of rigorous training. His hair, which he normally kept tied back, hung loose; framing and often hiding his face. His eyes seemed to be perpetually glazed over any time Harry could see them. And he only slightly seemed to bother with keeping his robes tidy. That day, Harry had also noted that most of the teachers were avoiding him. Flitwick called on him once or twice, and Snape shot a few overly-difficult questions his way, but those two aside...

It was all very weird. Harry had more than one mystery to solve, and it was hard to keep the two from interlacing. Especially since Solieyu still refused to just come out and tell him what on earth was wrong with him. "All in good time." He had said. "I'll tell you when I'm ready."

Closing the book and bringing his bad singing to an end, Harry shut his eyes and tilted his head back. They were going to Hagrid's that evening. Harry wasn't looking forward to it in the least. He still needed to go talk to Solieyu about that, but he wasn't looking forward to that, either.

Getting up and setting the book in his chair, Harry stretched and stared off towards the stairs leading to the boys' dorms. With a very audible groan, Harry trudged his way to his dorm room.

As expected, it was empty, save for his won't-tell-you-what's-wrong friend. Solieyu was once more sprawled out in bed, looking more haggard than Harry could remember him ever being. Harry closed the door behind him and walked the room, looming at his friend's bedside. A few minutes passed and then Harry sighed and asked, "It's you and me. No one else is around. No one else is going to *be* around. Would you just tell me what in the name of Merlin is wrong with you? I have other mysteries I need to be solving, you know."

"So solve them." Solieyu muttered.

"Oh, I'd love to. But see, one of my friends just so happens to be seemingly laid out with some unknown problems. He would tell his friends, except he's apparently still too spooked of what their reactions are going to be. Forget that some creature may start killing students again - we have to be vague and skip around the truth for some reason!" Harry shouted. "After I get out of here, I'm going to figure out where Tonks ran off to, then head for Hagrid's. I knew it would be useless to ask if *you* were coming, but I honestly have nothing better to be doing right now."

"Find Tonks, then." Solieyu said, still not even opening his eyes.

"Damn it, Leon..." Harry growled, leaning forward and slamming his palms down on the edge of Solieyu's bed. "Tell. Me. What. Is. Wrong."

"No."

"It's real nice that you can trust me, Leon, you know that?" Harry said.

"Isn't a matter of trust."

"Oh *really*? Then what is it? You already know that neither Tonks nor I will get jumpy over whatever you have to say. You *should* know that, anyway. Sometimes I wonder if what we say gets through to you." Harry stated, standing back up and crossing his arms.

"It does." Solieyu said. "But the same could be said for you."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Harry asked.

"It means that you're too thick to let this whole thing go and wait like I've asked you to." Solieyu said, sighing. Opening his eyes, the long-haired boy sat up with, Harry noticed, a sharp wince. "Look into my eyes and tell me I look healthy enough right now to do much of anything, Harry."

Harry narrowed his eyes as he looked into Solieyu's. He was obviously tired, and something seemed to almost be sapping his strength, if his half-asleep way of speaking was to be trusted. He was looking worse than he had when he was in class last, which was saying something. Finally, Harry murmured, "Whatever's wrong with you, it's making you sick. Worse than in the past. Right? I can at least guess, can't I?"

Laying back down and letting his eyes slip shut again, Solieyu hesitated for a moment before nodding. "You could say that, yes."

"And I'd assume that, if there was an easy way out, you'd have already gone to Madam Pomfrey for it. Right?"

"...Perhaps."

"Perhaps?" Harry echoed. "The blazing hells does that mean? Look, if Madam Pomfrey can get you to feeling better, why *wouldn't* you go to her?"

"I'm well aware I would feel better if I went to her. Believe me, Harry... if you were in my position, you'd be trying to get off of that stuff, too." Solieyu said, bringing an arm up to cover his eyes with.

"Trying to get off *what* stuff?" Asked Harry.

"You'd rather not know and I'd rather not talk about it. It would only make me feel worse." Came the reply.

It wasn't what Harry was after. "Maybe I should just sneak into her store room, see what I can dredge up on my own, then."

"No." Solieyu said, putting enough force behind the one word to make Harry blink.

"Then tell me what it is."

"No." Solieyu repeated. "I'm not going to tell you. And you're going to be late if you stay here, trying to interrogate me. It isn't pleasant, Harry. That should be enough to get you to keep out of my affairs."

"Should be, but isn't." Harry said, turning and walking over to his trunk. "What does it taste like? I'm assuming that it's rather horrible if you can't gulp it down."

While Harry rummaged around, eventually tugging his invisibility cloak out, Solieyu lay silent. After folding the cloak up and tucking it safely into his robes, Harry looked back over. "Leon?"

"Blood, Harry." Said Solieyu through a sigh. "It tastes like blood."

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"You alright?" Tonks asked.

"Not really." Harry replied.

"Still worrying about Leon? Look, he'll be okay. Just give him time, he'll be back to normal soon enough." Tonks said, throwing an arm over Harry's shoulders and casting a smile. "Now c'mon, cheer up! We've gotta look like we're all for paying Hagrid a visit."

"I'd rather down whatever Leon doesn't want to take." Harry grumbled.

One swat on the back of the head later, and the Ravenclaw duo were standing in front of Hagrid's hut. As Harry rubbed his aching skull, Tonks knocked on the door. A dog's barking came from inside. That would be Fang, Hagrid's dog. Harry had seen him accompany the large man around the grounds every so often. The creature looked like its face was melting, its body was drooping so much. Harry didn't even want to think about the smell that Hagrid and his dog would make in a one-room hut.

Before Harry could begin pondering other things, such as where Hagrid went to when he needed to use the bathroom, the door opened up. Hagrid blinked down at the two, and Harry and Tonks

blinked back up at him. Then a wide grin stretched across Hagrid's face.

"Arry!" He said, bringing two large hands down on Harry's shoulders and leaning over for a better look. "Was wonderin' when ye'd come down an' see me! Come on in, come on in. S'a bit dusty. Didn't plan on havin' company tonight..."

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It had all gone downhill from there. The three barely had any time to talk, as soon after their arrival. Dumbledore had shown up at Hagrid's doorstep with the Ministry of Magic himself in tow. Lucius Malfoy had also decided to step in and have a look around. Harry and Tonks had gone into hiding under the cloak off in the closest thing to a corner Hagrid's hut had.

An argument later and Hagrid was being escorted away, protesting the whole way, after giving a vague message about spiders to the seemingly-empty hut. Once they were sure that the group were gone, Harry yanked his cloak off and tucked it away in his robes again. "Damn it all! I finally decide to come down here and this is what happens!"

For a good minute, Tonks let Harry release his aggression, somewhat surprised at the colorful vocabulary he used in certain places when describing Lucius Malfoy, Draco Malfoy, Narcissa Malfoy, and any descendant or relative of any of the above. He finally calmed down after Fang drooled all over the front of his robes in an attempt at support. With a long sigh, Harry petted the now-ownerless hound and looked over at Tonks. "So what now?"

Tonks shrugged. "Dunno. I say we follow the spiders like Hagrid mentioned. What's the worst that could happen?"

Fang let out a sudden whimper and moved from Harry to under Hagrid's bed. Both Ravenclaws frowned at his sudden and rather strange behavior. "Well," Harry said, "that certainly bodes well, doesn't it?"

Exiting the hut and making quite sure that no one was around to see them, the two spent a few minutes looking around the general area for some spiders. "You'd think," Tonks growled after cleaning some dirt from under her fingernails, "that with how close you are with the things, they'd show right up!"

"Spiders are spiders. It's not like I can control them." Harry groused in return.

"Yeah, you can only talk to snakes. How unfortunate for us." Tonks grumped.

"Oh, shut it, Nymmy."

Finally - *FINALLY* - they found a group of small, black spiders scuttling down the side of the hut. Unfortunately, they seemed to be heading right into the Forbidden Forest. "My earlier point of well-boding stands." Harry sighed. "We have to go in there, don't we?"

"Looks like it." Tonks said.

"Great. How can the day get any better? Do you know what kind of things live in there?" Harry asked.

"Yup."

"Damn, me too. I think it'd be a lot easier on us if neither of us knew what *might* come and eat our faces off." Harry said, shaking his head slowly. "...We *really* have to go in there, don't we?"

"Come on, Brave Sir Harry." Tonks said, grabbing at one of Harry's hands and tugging him towards the trees. "Let's get this over with. So help me, if some creepy-crawly gets in my hair..."

The trip through the forest definitely wasn't at all fun. In addition to the constant feeling of being watched, it was nearly impossible to get around quickly.

Tree roots above the ground mixed with thorn bushes and other spiky fauna, causing one Ravenclaw or the other to let out the occasional swear. Wherever those spiders were leading them, it was somehow getting darker. Harry attributed this to the fact that the overhead

brush was getting thicker. The full moon that was out couldn't pierce through here.

Eventually, they had to resort to using the *Lumos* spell to keep going. Neither were particularly *wanting* to use it, as both knew exactly how many creatures in the forest might be attracted to it. But it was either that or stumble around in the pitch black darkness. Given their options, they chose to see what might approach them as opposed to being jumped by it.

"Look." Harry whispered, around a fifteen minutes later. "Up ahead."

"A clearing? Well thank Merlin." Tonks replied.

"You realize that you probably just jinxed us." Harry said.

"Shut up."

When they exited into the clearing, a chill ran down their spines. It might have been an opening in the forest, but it definitely wasn't anything to be happy about. A network of spiderwebs lined practically every inch of the place. Hundreds and hundreds of tiny, glowing eyes all focused on them as they entered. And in the center of it all was a very large opening that was covered with downed trees, cobwebs, and less savory materials. It was from this opening that a voice startled them.

"Who...are you...?"

"Harry, the hole is talking to us." Tonks whispered aside to Harry.

"Shh!" Harry said. Then, raising his voice, he addressed the opening. "Uh... we're friends of Hagrid... he was... taken away tonight and he told us to 'follow the spiders' to find answers..."

"Hagrid is gone...?"

"Yeah." Tonks chimed in. "The Minister of Magic was there and everything..."

"Why was he taken?"

"They think... they think he's opened the Chamber of Secrets again and--" Harry began. But he didn't get far. An angered hissing filled the spiders' den and, from the large opening, an equally large spider came crawling. Behind him was a slightly smaller but still gigantic mate.

"The Chamber of Secrets!" Roared what appeared to be the ruler of the other spiders. "Hagrid did not open it! They have done this in the past!"

"...Wait, he didn't open it? Then who did? ...Do *you* know what's attacking the students? Something keeps petrifying students and Hagrid was removed because they thought it might end up the same way it did last time..."

"Hagrid has never done anything to harm a soul, be it human or otherwise." Clicked the large spider. "He saved me from hungry predators when I was but a newborn. He raised me in a small cupboard until I got too big for it..."

Harry frowned. "I did see a cupboard or something in the diary..." He muttered softly. "Um... so, *do* you know who opened the Chamber? Or what's attacking?"

"We do. But we dare not speak its name." Said the spider. "Even we acromantulas fear such a creature, as it enjoys feasting on us."

"Feasting...? But that would mean it's big. *really* big..." Tonks said, tilting her head in confusion.

"How big...*is* this creature you fear?" Harry asked, tentatively.

"Far larger than even I." Said the spider. "Most creatures in this forest fear the name of Aragog. But not it. It fears nothing. It knows only hunger and death..."

"Aragog? Is that your name?" Harry asked.

"It is." Hissed the spider. "And now... I am afraid it is time to say goodbye, young human."

"What?" Harry asked, blinking.

"While we allow Hagrid safe passage in gratitude for raising me, I cannot deny my children fresh meat..." Aragog clicked.

"You're going to *eat* us?" Harry cried, goggling at the acromantula.

"Yes. You should have never entered this forest, friend of Hagrid." Said Aragog.

Beside him, Tonks let out a shrill gasp. Harry turned to look at her, about to ask why her reaction to being eaten had come so late. But she was staring at Aragog in a completely different sort of horror. "I know what it is, Harry..."

"Huh?"

"I know what they're scared of! I know what's been attacking the school!" Tonks said, rounding on Harry and grabbing at the front of his robes.

"What?" Harry asked, momentarily forgetting that a pack of bloodthirsty, giant spiders wanted nothing more than to rip them apart.

"It's--!" Tonks began. But a furious noise from Aragog halted her in her tracks.

"Do not speak of it!" Roared the creature. "Get them! Quickly!"

That was all it took. The swarm of spiders that had slowly been creeping into the clearing lunged out. Harry and Tonks let out twin cries of panic, whirled around, and took off running. While Tonks kept her wand lit, Harry was busy blasting approaching acromantulas from leaping at them. It proved to be quite the difficult task, as they literally seemed to be coming from out of the darkness itself. When one fell, two took its place.

"We're never gonna make it out of here!" Tonks cried, leaping over a bramble bush.

"Oh, yes we are!" Harry shouted, shooting a spider out of the air and catching up to his friend. "I'm not going to get eaten by a bunch of bloody spiders!"

"Talk to them!" Tonks said. "You're good with spiders, aren't you!"

"*NORMAL* spiders, yes!" Harry exclaimed. "I've never *had* to deal with spiders that were larger than my head! **DUCK!**"

Harry grabbed Tonks around the waist and yanked her hard to the left as a particularly huge acromantula came soaring out of nowhere. The two nearly toppled over, but colliding with a tree's trunk prevented it. Harry took aim and sent a firestarting curse at the spider as it turned around, urging Tonks to resume running.

"We can't outrun these things!" Tonks groaned. "If it was only brighter in here and I could help you...!"

"Don't worry about that, I'm doing just fine!" Harry called out, knowing it was a flat-out lie. The wave of spiders coming from behind them was frighteningly large. As Harry checked over his shoulder during a clear straightaway in the brush, he heard Tonks let out a shriek.

Grinding to a halt, Harry spun around to see a pair of spiders pinning her up against another tree's trunk. Harry jerked his wand in an arc, sending a bright orange flash of light to strike one of them. But his companion quickly pounced Harry to the ground before he could send a second attack their way. Harry landed hard on his back, his wand slipping through his fingers and coming to a halt just out of reach.

"Harry...!" Tonks whimpered from nearby. The spider swarm had caught up. Harry had noticed this, as several more sets of eyes had joined the ones from the acromantula on top of him.

"We've got to think of something, quick!" Harry yelled. But he was too worried about avoiding being eaten to think coherently.

The spiders moved in, surrounding the fallen pair of students. They clicked eagerly, a disgusting, slimy substance oozing from their mouths. But, as the spider on Harry reared back for the kill, something completely unexpected happened. A frenzied hissing from

nearby filled the air, causing all of the acromantulas to jerk their heads up and look off. A savage noise, along with the shrill sounds of dying spiders, then filled the eerie silence that had followed.

What happened next was complete chaos. A gigantic wolf burst through a large, thorn-covered hedge nearby, landing in the center of the spider swarm, in-between Harry and Tonks. Its teeth were gleaming distinctly with acromantula blood, which was also splattering a good amount of its body. It let out a low growl and then threw its head back in a howl. The effect was instantaneous; as one, the spiders leapt from Harry and Tonks, trying to escape the area. But the wolf wouldn't let them. While a few managed to get away, most were ripped apart brutally, be it via claws or fangs.

Harry and Tonks were quickly to their feet, with Harry grabbing at his wand. The two stood, almost mesmerized by the carnage unfolding before them. Another wave of spiders - bigger ones, if it were possible - was quickly approaching. For the briefest of moments, the two Ravenclaws stood motionless amidst one large wolf and dozens of mutilated spider bodies. Then, the wolf spun its head to the side and *stared* at them, baring its bloody fangs and emitting a deep growl.

"Tonks. We need to go." Harry whispered, staring back at the wolf as if piecing something together. "*NOW!*"

With that, Harry grabbed Tonks by the hand and began fleeing in the direction opposite the one that the second acromantula wave was approaching from. As they ran, they could hear the wolf tearing through the creatures as they arrived. But this batch seemed to actually get some attacks of their own in, as more than once, Harry and Tonks heard a high-pitched whimper.

"Hope that thing's okay..." Tonks said, quickly looking over her shoulder. "Harry, are we going the right way?"

"I'm pretty sure we are." Harry said.

"You alright?"

"Ask me again after we get back in the Tower." Harry said.

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The two slumped through the front doors of the school almost twenty minutes later, out of breath and under the invisibility cloak. But instead of heading the familiar path to Ravenclaw Tower, Harry seemed to be going somewhere else. When asked why, Harry replied with a question of his own. "What were you about to say back there, before Aragog ordered the attack?" He whispered.

"Huh? Oh! It's a basilisk, Harry, it *has* to be! It's just about the only thing that could spook *those* things... it can petrify, and its gaze causes death." Tonks said, looking down at the floor. "Hogwarts' pipes must be gigantic..."

"A basilisk? But... if its gaze causes death, how does it petrify?" Harry asked, trying to make his tired mind think back to all the research he had done.

"I think it has something to do with indirect sight..." Tonks said, gnawing at her lower lip softly.

"...Fred had the Haunts." Harry said, eyes lighting up. "If he saw the basilisk through one of *those*..."

The pieces of the puzzle that had been missing started tumbling, rapidly, into place in Harry's mind. "Luna had that stupid amulet of hers... Bulstrode must have had something in her 'personal items' that caused her to indirectly look at it..."

"What about Peeves, though?" Tonks asked.

"Probably either saw it the same way or it was just because he isn't exactly alive to begin with..." Harry replied. "I'm not sure. But... Okay, so what? Ginny Weasley's been letting a *basilisk* into the school? How the hell would something that large go unnoticed?"

"Well, mate, it kind of has a tendency to petrify anything that gets a look at it." Tonks said, dryly.

"At least no one's been killed by it yet. ...Hey, Tonks?"

"Yeah?"

"...How did Myrtle die?"

The two stopped, turning to stare at one another. "You don't think...?" Tonks began.

"I do. She must have been the one to have gotten killed the *last* time the Chamber was opened." Harry said, narrowing his eyes. "...We're going to see her. I need to know."

"What? But what about where we *were* going?" Tonks asked, as Harry suddenly did an about-face.

"After Myrtle." Harry said. "We may have to wait awhile, anyway. Come on."

"Wait awhile? Harry, what the hell are you on about?"

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As it turned out, it seemed like Myrtle wasn't entirely sure *how* she died. All she knew is that a boy's voice came from outside her stall while she was in the bathroom, crying. She opened the door to tell him that it was a girl's bathroom and that he should get out... and that was it. The next thing she knew, she was a ghost, choosing to haunt the area she had died in.

"Does that mean...it's around here somewhere?" Harry asked, looking around the bathroom slowly. "The entrance to the Chamber, I mean..."

"Dunno." Tonks said. "Myrtle, you never noticed anything strange *this* year, have you?"

"Well..." Began the ghost. "I *have* heard someone speaking strangely from time to time, but I was never good with languages. Opal Brightsky always used to pick on me for not being good with English, either, the stupid girl... This one time I..."

As Myrtle continued her story, Tonks turned back to Harry, who was peering closely at all of the faucets in the room, along with anything else that *might* hold a secret. "I think we should come back tomorrow for this, Harry. It's been a *long* night..."

"I know, I know..." Harry mumbled, hand brushing over the ornate design of a fish that adorned the back of one of the sinks. "...Maybe we should get back to what I wanted to do before I was sidetracked."

"Which was?" Tonks asked. "You never told me, you know."

"Check the hospital wing." Harry replied, turning and giving her a grim look.

"The hospital wing? Why?"

"If I'm right, it'll explain itself. Come on..." Harry said, pulling the cloak back out and slipping it over the two of them after glancing around the room in frustration once again.

"You never tell me anything." Tonks muttered.

As the two left, and the door closed behind them, Myrtle looked up. "...It's *rude* to leave when someone's **TALKING TO YOU!**" She roared after them.

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"Silencing charms on?" Harry whispered.

"Yeah, but..." Tonks began. Harry quieted her with a finger to his lips, motioning for her to creep up the corridor with him. They slipped into the hospital wing slowly, making sure that Madam Pomfrey wasn't lingering about as she sometimes did.

Once he knew they were in the clear, Harry removed the cloak and began looking around the room as fast as he could. He kept the cloak out in case an emergency popped up, and whispered for Tonks to keep close to him for the same reason. The two made a lap around the hospital wing, checking every bed for an occupant. But the only ones who were in there were the current victims of the basilisk. This

seemed to both confuse and irritate Harry to no end. He insisted that they sit and wait under the cloak for awhile, just in case. It was driving Tonks batty, since he still hadn't explained what he was doing.

But once he seemed sure that no one was going to spontaneously enter in the dead of night, he swore and got to his feet. "Come on. Let's go get some sleep." He scowled.

The trip back to Ravenclaw Tower was slower than it should have been. Harry was dragging his feet and, for some reason, Tonks knew it wasn't due to fatigue. As they walked, she slipped an arm around his shoulders. This seemed to at least cause him to smile a bit more, though he still seemed troubled by something. As they approached the portrait of a currently-asleep Walter, Harry cleared his throat and the duo slipped from under the cloak once more.

"Hmm? Ohh, it's you..." Said the elderly wizard, blinking groggily. "What are you doing out at this time of night?"

"Walt, did anyone come out after they shouldn't have?" Harry asked quickly.

"What's that? Oh, yes, I think your friend did, actually. He said he was going to see Madam Pomfrey. Looked rather ill, the poor lad." Walter said, rubbing at his eyes.

"Damn." Harry hissed. "I knew it! I *knew* it!"

"Knew what? What's *wrong*, Harry?" Tonks asked.

"Inside." Harry said. Then, facing Walter again, he spoke the password. Walter nodded, slumping in his reading chair once more as his portrait moved to allow them entrance. Unfortunately, the common room wasn't empty. Several older students were off in one corner, looking exhausted as they slaved over ridiculously-long sheets of parchment. Harry swore under his breath and led Tonks over to their usual chair. Harry slumped down in it, thankful that the older students at least seemed to be too busy to notice he and Tonks' ragged and dirty robes.

"Do we have to wait?" Tonks whispered to him, glancing over towards the older students.

Harry shook his head. "No. Just don't yell anything when I tell you, alright?"

"Yell?" Tonks asked, creasing her brow in confusion.

"I know where Leon is." Harry murmured, leaning his head in closer to Tonks'.

"Well, you're a fair bit quicker than I am, then. Walt said he went to the hospital wing, but he wasn't there when we were." Tonks said.

"Yeah. Because he was too busy saving our hides in the forest." Harry said, his right hand balling up into a fist.

"What? Harry, make some sense... A giant wolf saved us, not Leon. Are you sure one of those acromantulas didn't get you?"

"Tonks, look at it! It all makes sense!" Harry hissed in as quiet a voice as he could manage. "He gets really weak randomly. He has to take some potion that tastes like *BLOOD*. He's nowhere to be found and we just got saved by some random wolf in the middle of the Forbidden Forest! It's a full moon, Tonks, you said so yourself! Leon is a **werewolf**!"

Tonks blinked, working out things for herself. "But... No, Harry, that can't be right, can it? I mean, he's looked pretty rough even when there wasn't a full moon around!"

"Maybe the potion makes him feel normal... Maybe *that's* part of the reason he's been looking so awful this week." Harry reasoned.

"Maybe he just doesn't like potions that taste of blood." Tonks suggested.

"Oh, come on." Harry said. "Where is he then?"

"Up in your dorm?" Tonks tried, raising an eyebrow. "You haven't been up there yet, you know."

"Fine, I'll go look." Harry muttered, getting to his feet and leaving. A minute later and he was back down in the common room, shaking his head as he approached Tonks again. "Not in bed."

"But he's been around during *other* full moons, Harry!" Tonks said.

"Has he? Can you remember where he's been on every full moon we've had?" Harry asked.

"Of course I can't! But that isn't the ruddy point!" Tonks hissed.

"Then what *is* the point?" Harry asked, leaning back in the chair and crossing his arms. "Didn't you see the way that wolf *looked* at us? It wanted us to get out of there. Now why would some random wolf not only jump out of nowhere to save us, but also stay behind to allow us a safe escape?"

"...I don't know." Tonks said, her voice even softer.

"Neither do I." Harry said, his equally as quiet. "If this is all that's wrong with him, he should have told us, though..."

"Yeah... Especially after tonight. I mean, even if we were spooked of him being a werewolf or something, after he saved us like that, surely he couldn't think that we'd hate him because of it..." Tonks said.

"I hope he's alright." Harry said, looking off towards the entrance tunnel. "He isn't back yet, and he didn't come to the hospital wing while we were there..."

"Do you... do you think the spiders...?" Tonks began, worry in her eyes.

"I dunno, Tonks." Harry said, sighing slowly. "I just don't know."

The two sat silent for awhile after that. Eventually, the older students packed up their things and went to bed, leaving Harry and Tonks alone in the common room. Both were lost in their thoughts. Harry's mind was putting the last pieces of both puzzles together and, though a few pieces were still missing from them, both seemed so complete now that it almost didn't matter.

Ginny Weasley was somehow bringing a basilisk into the main part of the school. The entrance was, probably, somewhere in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, judging by what she had said. Sure, it wasn't much to go on, but it was too convenient. Why had the diary been dumped in *that* particular bathroom? Out of all of the bathrooms in Hogwarts, why Myrtle's? To Harry, it seemed as if Ginny had entered and, for one reason or another, a moment of sanity took control of her. She had thrown the diary away and fled.

The victims of the basilisk all were fortunate enough to not come in direct contact with the beast. Harry had seen drawn images of a basilisk. He knew how big some of them were in comparison to humans. If the drawings were to be believed, they had enormous fangs. So even if you escaped death, you might not escape being eaten alive.

Still... a basilisk? They didn't come very small. And, providing *this* creature was the same one that was living during the Chamber's first opening, it had to have been very large by now, indeed. But how does such a large beast traverse the school without being seen? Naturally, some victims would have an indirect look at the thing, but students always tended to walk in groups. Even Draco Malfoy had an entourage.

And what of Solieyu? He was mysteriously absent the same night that a giant wolf had appeared before he and Tonks. It couldn't have been coincidence. It was all too convenient. Things fell into place too easily for it to have been coincidence. But this left Harry worrying about the status of his friend. The last time they had talked, it had been more an argument than anything else. Harry certainly didn't want the last things he said to Solieyu to have been laced with anger. But, as it didn't seem like the boy was going to turn up, Harry thought it best to at least try to get some sleep. If he still wasn't around by morning, Harry would go straight to Dumbledore and *make* him find his friend somehow.

"Tonks. We should rest." Harry said, sounding as worn out as he looked, finally.

"Are you sure?" Tonks asked. "What if Leon shows up?"

"He's never around when you need him, so I doubt he will." Harry said, smiling weakly. "Come on. Let's get to bed. I doubt either of us will sleep, but..."

"Yeah..." Tonks said, hopping off the arm of the chair at the same time Harry stood up. "I hope he's alright, though. If he really did save us... Harry, they injured him... you heard those cries of pain."

"Yeah." Harry said, walking with Tonks across the room. "I know. All we can do is hope. And pray we manage to fall asleep. It'll be far easier that way, as morning will take forever to come if we stay awake."

The two exchange a final, worried glance before parting ways. As Harry slipped back into the second year boys' dorm and slipped out of his tattered robes, he couldn't help but look at Solieyu's empty bed. And, as he stretched out on his own bed after changing, Harry couldn't help but stare up at the full moon as it shone, tauntingly, in through one of the room's windows.

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Author's Notes: Guh. Okay, for the record? After spending way too long putting this chapter off - blame FF10, Psychonauts, and Fatal Frame 2 for my delays. I've been having fun playing games on my new PS2 - I finally sat down and powered out everything after Harry and Tonks entered Hagrid's hut in one night. I didn't want to, but I felt I needed to. It's been far too long since I updated and I was feeling mighty guilty about it.

So... let the serious "wtf-ing" begin! I'm not telling one way or another. You, like Harry, will have to wait to see what Leon has to say on the matter. If it WAS him out there. And if he's actually still, y'know, ALIVE.

Looks like it came out as one long chapter after all, huh? I was originally going to put some more in, but that would have only delayed it even further. I KNOW I'm never going to reach 20 chapters now. I think we're only three or four chapters away from finishing Chamber Reopened, and I couldn't be happier. We're OFFICIALLY in the final stretch, which means I don't have to effing pad anything and

can get my version of the ending on with! Which means fun and action from there on out!

I bet you guys are wondering what the crap the Sorting Hat's going to drop out, if not Gryffindor's Sword, huh? I've had that planned from the beginning, so don't worry about it. I also have a few interesting twists and turns for a couple of people. So be sure to check back regularly. I'll try and keep my profile updated with news. And for the record, since FFN looooathes my sticking URLs in my profile, I'll stick fanart links in the Homepage link part, okay? They'll link to the newest pic, since it looks like more are going to come. I'd never think of trying to rush my artist dude, as I know how infuriating stuff like that can be. You can't rush good art, folks.

So...yeah. Enjoy this stuff, guys. If this doesn't spark a "What the hell are you doing?" debate for Chamber, nothing will.

Until next time!

Post-Edit Update: Okay, I got crap for sleep, so I apologize if I missed something in the editing of this chapter. I'm still not entirely awake yet.

Chapter 15 – What Lies Beneath

Harry was waiting for him when he entered the following morning.

He looked nightmarish. His hair was completely mussed-up. His eyes were almost red, they were so bloodshot. His robes were in worse tatters than Harry's had been. Harry knew perfectly well that regular cuts and scrapes could easily be healed, so it was pointless to search for those. Not that he really needed to. No, all the evidence was pointing itself out clearly.

Solieyu looked over at Harry as he slowly made his way across the dorm room, wincing with each step. He slipped off his robes and changed into a pair of pajamas and, once finished, crawled into bed. Harry watched him all the while, waiting to see if he would say anything. Surely he couldn't figure both Harry and Tonks to be stupid enough to believe it *wasn't* him

"You look like hell." Harry finally said.

"Thanks." Solieyu murmured. He was laying on his stomach and had his face buried into one of his pillows.

"We don't care." Harry stated. "We worked it out and we don't care."

"You haven't." Came the soft reply.

"Haven't? Haven't what?" Asked Harry.

"Worked it out." Solieyu said. Turning his head only enough so that he could look at Harry with one eye, he continued, "I bet I know what you've worked out. And it's completely wrong."

"It can't be wrong." Harry said, folding his arms across his chest. "Too many coincidences for it to be wrong."

"Perhaps." Solieyu said, and Harry noted how much amusement had seeped into his tired voice. "But you're still wrong. Close, but wrong, nonetheless. Shouldn't you be in class?"

"Tonks is covering for me and don't change the subject." Harry said, glaring at Solieyu. "We know you saved us out there. When did you get in? You had us both worried. If it matters, we also know what's been attacking the students now. Were you there for that, too? How long *were* you around?"

"Just long enough to rescue you. What's causing the attacks?" Solieyu asked.

Noting mentally that Solieyu confirmed something, *finally*, Harry continued, "It's a basilisk. We also figured that it must be getting in through Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. But it requires way too many odd things to be in place."

"Such as?"

"Such as," Harry began, walking over to sit on the edge of Solieyu's bed, "Ginny Weasley having kept Riddle's diary. Ginny Weasley choosing that bathroom to throw it away in. The pipes being big enough for the basilisk to get around. The door being big enough for the basilisk to get *through*. No one noticing a giant, hulking snake slithering through the damn school."

"Been thinking this through, have you?" Solieyu asked.

"I was up most of the night. I had nothing better to do." Replied a bitter Harry.

"You should have slept, then." Solieyu said.

"I'll let that one slip. But only because you saved us." Harry said, shaking his head. "So when did you get back, anyway?"

"Before the sun came up." Came Solieyu's reply.

"Naturally."

With a dry chuckle, Solieyu continued, "Completely wrong. Anyway... it was like a neverending swarm. If someone ever dares you to bite an acromantula, turn and walk away. It isn't a pleasant taste."

"I'd imagine it isn't." Harry said. "*Why*, exactly, are we completely wrong? All of the signs fit."

"I've been around you on other full moons, Harry."

"We haven't exactly been paying attention lately. Other things to deal with." Harry said, half-glaring down at his friend.

"Your loss, then."

"If you aren't a werewolf, what are you then?"

"Why should I say? At this point, you should have enough clues to work it out. And if you come to the wrong conclusion, it's all the more amusing for me. I need a few good laughs every now and then, Harry." Solieyu murmured.

"Well now you're just being stubborn." Harry said, glaring fully now.

"It's more fun this way." Solieyu said.

"To you, maybe. Driving me crazy, it is."

"If you haven't worked it out by this next Halloween... I'll tell you then" Solieyu said. "I promise."

Harry blinked. "Really? You'll tell us?"

"Yes."

"Well why Halloween? If you haven't noticed, bad things happen on Halloween!" Harry said, flailing wildly.

"So I've noticed. But then, if anything *does* happen, I'd be more a help since I wouldn't have to hold back." Solieyu said.

"Hold back." Harry repeated. "How often, exactly, have you held back?"

"Not many. As you can see, my condition leaves me... abysmally weak and tired most of the time."

"Can the potion--?"

"Yes. But I only take it if I absolutely have to. After you find out, whatever way it happens... I'll let you watch me take it. Then, maybe, you'll know why I try to keep from it." Solieyu offered.

"Sounds like a plan."

"So what now?" Solieyu asked. "Not a very good idea to hunt a basilisk down on your own."

"Mm. I've been thinking about that, too." Harry said. "But I haven't reached a lot of probable ideas."

"You could always ask Lockhart." Solieyu suggested.

"Much as I'd love to see him get eaten," Harry began, smirking, "I don't think I'd get anywhere. In all honesty, I guess I can understand why the staff has been so reluctant to take action. I can't imagine it would be very easy to kill something like that."

"Perhaps they're hoping it goes away on its own. Didn't it do that last time?"

"From what I saw in Riddle's diary? Yeah, it did. ...Strangely enough, it was after Hagrid had been expelled." Harry said. "I wonder if that's the real reason behind why they took Hagrid off to Azkaban last night."

"They took him away, did they? I wasn't there for that, either." Solieyu said.

"Yeah. Tonks and I didn't get much of a chance to talk to him before Dumbledore, Fudge, and Malfoy's father showed up. Hagrid told us to follow the spiders before leaving, though..." Harry explained.

"Ahh. So once again, you can blame Hagrid for your ending up in a bad situation."

"Something like that." Harry grumbled darkly. "Anyway... if anything else happens, anything at all, then I'll go to Dumbledore directly. Surely he can find something to do about it."

"And if he can't? Or won't?" Solieyu asked.

"*Then* we do it ourselves." Harry said. "I'm not going to let anyone get killed because they refused to take action again."

"Mm." Solieyu replied. From his tone, it was obvious that he was on the verge of falling asleep.

"I thought you didn't rest." Harry commented as he got to his feet.

"I don't like to rest. I do *need* it, however. You'll find very few living creatures who can survive without sleep."

"Noted. I'll be in the common room if you need anything." Harry said, heading for the door. "And just so we're perfectly clear on it - we aren't spooked, we aren't afraid, and we're both grateful that you saved us."

"Duly noted. Goodnight, Harry." Solieyu murmured.

"Morning, Leon."

"Whatever."

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"You look like hell." Tonks commented as she and Harry made their way down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

"I love too, too." Harry scowled. He knew he must have looked awful. After all, if he got any sleep the previous night, it was in bursts so short that they didn't register with him. "You know, he said I was wrong."

"What, about... *that*?" Tonks asked, glancing around quickly.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. I don't see how I *could* be, all things considered. But he *did* say if we didn't get it right by this next Halloween, he'd

come clean and just tell us. So at least I can get one thing off of my Things to Solve list."

Upon entering the hall, the hair on the back of Harry's neck stood on end. His eyes quickly scanned the room. For some reason, only professors Vector and Sinistra were present at the staff table. Harry and Tonks had actually arrived on time for once, so this was quite odd. Harry tried pushing the feeling out of his mind, however. No matter what might be happening, the fact remained that he'd be useless unless he got something to eat.

"I don't like it, Tonks." Harry murmured, halfway through some eggs and toast. "Don't like it at all."

"Yeah... something seems odd. You don't think...?"

"I hope not." Harry replied, gravely. "If anyone's gotten killed..."

"Hey, Harry...?"

"Yeah?"

"We're lacking a handful of redheads..."

Harry choked hard on his toast, grabbing at his goblet and gulping down some pumpkin juice as his eyes went to the Gryffindor table. None of the Weasleys were seated. It wasn't odd for Ginny to be absent, all things considered... but George was almost always there. And for Ron to miss a meal... well, even Harry took note of things like that.

"Damn!" Harry swore quietly, getting to his feet. Tonks was right behind him as he made his way for the doors again. Just as they crossed over, someone grabbed hold of his right arm harshly. Jumping and reaching for his wand, Harry stopped when he realized that George was the one next to him. His eyes were wide and he was out of breath, panting heavily and half bent-over.

"H-Harry..." George said, between deep breaths, "You've gotta help us...!"

"George, calm down! What's happened? Has... has someone been killed...?" Harry asked, not sure if he really wanted to know the answer or not. When George shook his head, Harry felt relief surge through him. But it was short-lived, however, as George asked them to follow him - and be quick about it.

Together, the three took off running. Even though he was winded, George managed to keep a good distance ahead of them. He had to stop a few times as they went to wait for Harry and Tonks to catch up. Finally, George slowed to a walk, put his finger up to his lips, and crept around the next corner. Harry and Tonks tiptoed after him.

"Hi." George said, putting a hand on Ron's back. Ron, who was pale and peeking around another corner, simply nodded in reply. George motioned for the Ravenclaws to join them. As the two approached, they heard the unmistakable sound of the staff talking in heated whispers.

"...lling you that we *must* do something!" Said McGonagall.

"Yes! We can't keep going on like this, Albus!" Squeaked Flitwick.

"I understand your concern, my friends." Said the calm voice of Dumbledore. "But there is nothing we *can* do. Even I do not know the location that leads to the Chamber of Secrets. I am, however, quite open to suggestions. I am afraid that one of the side effects of aging is a bad memory. And, if I may say so, even one such as myself can often overlook the most obvious of ideas..."

Silenced took hold of the corridor then. When it was broken, it was by none other than Snape. "Why don't we have Gilderoy hunt the thing down?" He sneered, saying the Defense professor's name as if it were disgusting.

"W-What?" Said an obviously startled Lockhart. "Oh, but Severus..."

"Weren't you just telling me the other day that you were sure you knew not only *what* was causing the attacks, but *where* the Chamber's entrance was located? By all means, Lockhart, show us your... talent." Snape said. Harry could almost hear the oily smile in the man's voice.

"B...But Severus..." Lockhart said, sounding near the verge of defeat.

"A wonderful idea, Severus." Agreed Dumbledore, with an open smile on his face. "We are in your care, Gilderoy."

George whirled and, in one fluid motion, had everyone pressed back against the shadowed corner just in time. Several of the departing professors rushed by, talking quietly between themselves. Harry picked up only a little of it - it seemed as if the Mandrake antidote was near completion. A small consolation.

After the coast was clear, George turned to Harry and Tonks and stepped out into the corridor. "If Lockhart's going to stop it, we're as good as dead. Look at what was written on the wall."

Harry, Tonks, and Ron followed George out of the shadows. While Harry and Tonks read, Ron looked off, eyes narrowed, arms crossed.

"...George? Does this mean what I think it does?"

"Yeah. Ron heard it. He came to get me. I came to get you two, since you're more likely to have an idea on what to do." George said, looking off as well. "Ginny's been taken into the Chamber. Looks like she was involved... guess I can't try to fool myself about it anymore."

"Damn it, I hate being right all the time." Harry sighed, running a hand back through his hair.

"Well, we can't let that idiot Lockhart handle things, now can we?" Tonks said, putting a hand on her hip and looking between the three. "Harry, why don't the two of us go pay him a visit? George and Ron can go keep an eye on the staff. The last thing we need is to be intercepted."

"Good idea. Try not to worry too much, George." Harry said, turning to the older redhead and smirking. "I've stopped Voldemort twice now. I think I can handle a giant snake."

"Good luck, mate." George said, clapping a hand on Harry's shoulder briefly. "You too, Tonks. Try and feed that royal nonce to the creature while you're at it, alright? Get him out of our hair for good."

"Can't make any promises." Harry said, nodding to Tonks. The two took off running in the direction that Lockhart left down. "But we'll give it our best!"

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"So what are we gonna do now?" Tonks asked as she and Harry ran through the halls. For a man his age, Lockhart certainly was *fast*.

"It's obvious, isn't it? We're going to hijack that idiot and take him with us. If I'm going to fight a basilisk, I might as well have a shield, right?" Harry said, grinning crookedly.

"Harry!"

"Sorry, sorry. But hey, if it happens, it happens. I have no clue how the hell one would even go about fighting something like that, though. I mean, you can't look at it, right? So how do you see where you're aiming? Fighting it in enclosed areas is no good, because you're at a disadvantage and frankly, I'm not sure how fast those things can move. But fighting in a wide-open area is just as bad, since *it* has more room to move, too!" Harry said.

"So your only real option is to blindly fling spells behind you as you run around aimlessly? Well that's real nice, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Harry scowled. "Hence, we need Lockhart. He'll come in handy somehow, I reckon."

Tonks snorted. "Yeah. His squeals of terror will get the thing to come right for you."

"Well, it'd save me some effort, I guess..." Harry said. "But then how would I find Ginny? Dammit, if I had been thinking clearly, I might have been able to prevent this from happening..."

"Alright, no beating yourself up over it." Tonks said, giving Harry the evil eye. "I'll do it later if you want, but you need to focus right now. ...And what makes you think you'll be fighting the stupid thing by yourself, anyway?"

Making a face, Harry replied, "Didn't you know? I'm the hero. Heroes always fight alone."

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"And just what the hell do you think *you're* doing?"

Lockhart froze, slowly turning to look over his shoulder to find two Ravenclaws aiming their wands at him. Narrowing his eyes, he stood up straight, leaving his hastily-packed trunk behind. "I should have expected this, I suppose."

"Going somewhere?" Tonks asked.

"Not anymore, it would seem." Lockhart said, crossing his arms.

"Indeed." Harry agreed. "Care to explain to us why you're running away? Aside from the fact that you're completely useless?"

Narrowing his eyes further, Lockhart smiled crookedly. "Ahh, I'm not entirely useless, dear boy. While I might be subpar in most fields of magic, I *am* rather adept at memory charms... it's come in handy quite often in my... travels..."

Harry and Tonks exchanged a quick glance. "So..." Tonks began, "What are you telling us?"

"I think he's saying that he stole all the material in his books." Harry said.

A smarmy smile confirmed Harry's guess. "Five points to Ravenclaw." Said Lockhart. "Yes, you hit the nail on the head, as usual, Harry. Nobody wants to read about some crosseyed old drunkard managing to luck his way to victory against a group of vampires! But throw in some sparkling robes, keep your teeth in good condition, and you'll have the wizarding world in your pocket."

"Taking their stories and modifying their memories afterwards. How on earth did Dumbledore choose you for this job?" Tonks asked, shaking her head slowly.

"I think he was trying to expose me for what I am." Scowled Lockhart, glancing off to the side. "Now... what is it you two want? I've got places to be. As you can see, I was in the middle of packing when I was so rudely interrupted."

"You're coming with us." Harry declared. "We're going to fight the basilisk and save Ginny Weasley from the Chamber of Secrets."

"Nice recap." Tonks murmured.

"Shut up." Harry said, quickly shooting Tonks a glare. Looking back to Lockhart, he smiled grimly. "You're coming with us, whether you want to or not, you arrogant bloody ponce."

"Children these days... so rude to your elders." Lockhart snorted. "And what if I decline?"

"There's no declining." Harry stated. "Come with us or I'll personally see to an inversion of whatever manhood you have left."

"Eww." Said Lockhart and Tonks at the same time.

"March." Harry growled, jabbing Lockhart in the chest with his wand. "And so help me, if you try anything funny..."

Stiffening slightly, Lockhart began walking towards the door. Harry and Tonks followed closely behind, wands trained on the man's head. The Ravenclaw duo gave out directions as they made their way through the corridors of Hogwarts, thankful that no one crossed their paths. Harry mirthlessly wondered why he had good luck in only the worst of situations.

When they arrived at Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, Lockhart glanced around in confusion. "What are you going to do, dunk my head in a toilet?"

"We ought of dangle him over Myrtle's - let her have a go at him." Tonks grumbled. "On that note, though, what *are* we gonna do, Harry? I mean, we know the entrance is in here somewhere, but..."

"Yeah, I know. Keep a good eye on the idiot, I'm going to take a look around." Harry said, heading off towards the stalls. "Myrtle? Myrtle, are you there? It's me, Harry Potter..."

Almost at once, the ghostly head of Moaning Myrtle popped through one of the stall doors. "Ohh, Harry... you *did* come back..." She said. And then, glancing across the room, she asked, "Who's *he*?"

"A golden dandy. Myrtle, do me a favor? Could you help Tonks keep an eye on him? Please? I've got to figure out where the Chamber of Secrets' entrance is..."

Smiling strangely, Myrtle nodded, floating towards Lockhart. With a grin, she ran a pale finger along (and slightly *through*) one of his arms, causing him to shudder. "You're gorgeous." She purred. Lockhart let out an uncomfortable whimper.

After a good half hour of searching, Harry let out a sigh of frustration. "Where the blazes could it *be*?"

"Myrtle..." Tonks began, trying not to snicker at the expression on Lockhart's face. "You uh... didn't happen to hear anything strange the day you died, did you?"

"Aside from the strange voice? No..." Myrtle said.

"Do you remember where you heard it?" Tonks continued.

Thinking for a moment, Myrtle turned and pointed to a sink. "I think it came from over there somewhere, but... I can't be sure... it was so long ago..."

Harry went over to the sink immediately. Kneeling down, he squinted as he inspected it. After a few moments, he uttered a soft, "What the...?"

"What is it?" Tonks asked.

"It's a snake... carved into the sink itself." Harry said, looking over his shoulder. "What do you think? Should I try saying something to it in Parseltongue?"

"Couldn't hurt." Tonks said.

Taking a deep breath, Harry turned back to the engraved snake and murmured, "Open up!"

"English." Tonks commented.

"Damn. Um... Okay, let me try again." Harry said. Concentrating harder this time, he murmured, "Open up!"

"English again. And now your hair is green." Tonks said.

"What? Oh, for..." Harry said, closing his eyes and shifting his hair back to its normal color before growling, "*Open up, dammit.*"

"That wasn't English." Tonks said, quietly.

Indeed it wasn't. Almost at once, the sink let out a tremendous groan and began shaking. Harry jumped back just in time for the sink to open up, revealing a large hole in the ground. Stepping closer once more, Harry peered into it, letting out a low whistle. "Looks deep..." And, taking a small piece of the sink that had rattled off in its move, Harry chucked it into the hole. A good ten seconds later and a faint 'thunk' issued from it.

"Very deep." Harry commented. "Tonks, throw the idiot in. If he makes it alright, we follow."

"What?" Lockhart squeaked. "Now see *here*, boy, I will not be-- *WHOOOOOOA!*"

Tonks smiled, peering over the edge of the hole as Lockhart disappeared into it. "No protesting allowed." She said.

A few seconds later, a loud swear came from the opening.

"Guess that means it's safe enough to go down." Harry said. "I'll go first, alright?"

"Think I can't handle him for a few seconds?" Tonks teased.

"I think I don't want to risk it." Harry replied, smiling. A few moments passed before Harry spoke again. "Tonks, look... I dunno what's gonna happen down there. But... but if anything happens, I just... um... Well, I was..."

"I know." Tonks murmured, leaning in to give Harry a quick kiss. "I do, too."

"You do?" Harry asked, blinking.

"Yeah..." Tonks said, smiling. "I do. ...Go on, hero. Our end of the year fun's just gotten started. Let's get this over with so we can brag to Leon... and win the House Cup for our troubles."

Chuckling, Harry nodded. "Alright. Well... here goes nothing." And with that, Harry leapt into the dark tunnel. It twisted its way down, with Harry unable to see anything. Bracing himself as best he could for an unknown impact, Harry got his wand ready. If Lockhart was alive, he would be in a worse mood than he *had* been in. And he would probably have drawn his wand by now. That is, if the basilisk hadn't come along and gobbled him up.

"If only." Harry muttered darkly, a matter of seconds before being shot out of the end of the tunnel. Crashing hard on his left side, Harry quickly rolled onto his back and aimed his wand at Lockhart. Grinning through his pain, Harry said, "Not today."

Lockhart, wand aimed right back at Harry, scowled. "What makes you think you could get off a spell faster than me?"

"Once again, I feel the need to point out that I'm the hero, whether I want to be or *not*. You can't kill the hero." Harry said, making a face. "Now put that damn thing away so I can get up."

Reluctantly, Lockhart did so. But just as Harry was getting to his feet, Tonks came flying out of the tunnel. She crashed into him and sent them both back down to the floor. Lockhart blinked in surprise as the two Ravenclaws muttered swears he had never heard of, each rubbing at their heads.

"Jeez... it's a good thing I have a hard head..." Harry muttered, rubbing at his scar.

"Sorry..." Tonks groaned. "I thought you would've been outta the way!"

"Care to get offa me?" Harry asked. "Don't think I can kill a giant monster with you on me. No offense."

Blushing, Tonks rolled off to one side. Spotting Lockhart, she took aim at him. "Shut up!" She mumbled.

Grinning, Harry once again got to his feet, offering Tonks a hand up. After casting Lumos, they finally got a good look at what they had landed on. Tonks let out a quiet whimper.

"Bones..." Harry said, shuddering. "I've been laying... in a bone pile. Oh, that's just *LOVELY*."

"At least you didn't land face first." Lockhart growled.

Shuddering once more, Harry finally got to look around the room they were in. It was small, circular, and led off down a wide tunnel. Motioning for Lockhart to take the lead, Harry and Tonks once again walked a few paces behind the man. Lockhart might be worthless in combat, but he made for a fine, walking shield. When the tunnel ended, the three stepped out into a lavish, long corridor, filled with elaborate statues that lined the walls. Most looked like the pictures Harry had seen of Salazar Slytherin. The chamber didn't seem completed, however. It was as if Slytherin had just up and vanished. The part of the room they were standing in was rock and dirt just like in the tunnel.

"What now?" Tonks asked.

"We keep going..." Harry said.

"Do we have to?"

"Unfortunately. Come on... the faster we do this, the sooner we get to leave."

Harry started forward, glancing up at the ceiling to see a long snake engraved from one end to the other. As he was admiring the scenery, however, Tonks let out a pair of yelps. One issued towards Harry to watch out, the other as she tumbled forward. Spinning, Harry saw events play out in slow motion. Lockhart was aiming at Harry, a sadistic grin on his face. The burst of light at the tip of his wand was growing. But just before it was loosed, Tonks tripped, slamming into Lockhart from the side. Lockhart lost his balance and went tipping over, as well, hitting the back of his head against the hard, rocky wall. His concentration broken, his spell flew from his wand, smashing into the ceiling. Tonks leapt out of the way just in time. A number of large rocks came pouring down, a particularly large one crashing into the top of Lockhart's head. Having been injured so much in such a short period, Lockhart promptly keeled over forward, out cold.

Tonks looked up just in time to see Harry leap out of the way of a particularly large chunk of ceiling that had come loose from the rest. Lockhart's spell had obviously done more damage than either Ravenclaw realized. The cave roof seemed to be remarkably bad, and both she and Harry had to keep dodging bits and pieces of it as they fell. Unfortunately, this cut off Harry from Tonks. Bits of the large, ornate snake on the ceiling were now blocking the way forward. Harry was on one side, Tonks and Lockhart were on the other.

When the rumbling finally ended, Harry called out, "Tonks! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine! If you call being stuck with this idiot 'fine,' anyway. What about you?" Tonks asked.

"Few scrapes, nothing serious." Harry said, stepping up to the rubble and peering through a small hole. "See if you can't clear some of this away, alright? I'm going to go on ahead. That idiot caused enough trouble... hopefully we don't have to try and escape with the basilisk hot on our heels..."

"Ohh, don't even suggest something like that." Tonks whined. "Alright, I guess I'll blast some stone while you're gone... Be careful, Harry, alright? ...Come back to me in one piece."

"I will." Harry said. Then, with a faint grin on his face, he added, "Didn't I tell you earlier? Looks like I'll be fighting on my own after all."

Turning, Harry took off running. Tonks watched until he had passed on to the next room and whatever it held. Biting down on her lower lip, she forced herself not to think anything morbid. Taking a deep breath, she convinced herself that Harry would be okay... that she would see him alive again. As she began moving smaller bits of rock and stone away, she made a promise to herself. Once Harry returned, she would definitely tell him, in her own words, how she felt.

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Author's Notes: I know, I KNOW, it's like two weeks past when I said it would be. Blame writer's block and general laziness. Be glad I got it done when I did. I finally found a place with a copy of Kingdom Hearts in, so I rented that and have been playing it. In addition, a friend sent me the whole of King of Braves GaoGaiGar, a 49-episode series. Needless to say, I've had a lot to do. I've got a backlog of anime that's ridiculously long. Ach. In addition, there's that issue with my sleeping schedule I've been dealing with lately. But I'm FINALLY back to normal. Almost. I'm still a couple hours from being back on the schedule I WAS on, but it's close enough.

So... yeah. We get the setup to the big finale, don't we? Harry's alone and the other two got left behind. And a cute little moment or two between them! And just what part of Leon's 'problem' was Harry wrong about? Oh, the stuff I torment you people with!

Here's to hoping none of my readers got caught up in the Swirling Bitch of Doom that's slamming into the southern US right now. I'm in northeastern Oklahoma, so while we may get slightly clipped by the outer edge of the thing as it spins its way inland, there's no risk of anything sketchy happening. Good luck to anyone or their families trying to get through the thing unscathed. I, like many others, have been glued to the Weather Channel to keep an eye on where the hell that thing is heading.

Chapter 16 – The Final Victim

The day had started poorly.

It had proceeded into horrible territory.

But right now? Well, right now was pure, unadulterated hell.

Time was funny sometimes. The incident with Tonks tripping into Lockhart had happened in slow motion to Harry. But right now, staring down what he now knew to be a younger Voldemort as well as having a basilisk steadily approaching... Now, everything was happening far too quickly. Harry wasn't being given enough time to collect his thoughts and to think of what would be the best thing to do, logically. Of course, he rarely got this opportunity. Especially at Hogwarts.

As the stone mouth of Salazar Slytherin crashed open, Harry took off running in the opposite direction, heading for the entrance to the room. He heard Riddle speak to the basilisk in what was very clearly Parseltongue, followed by the monster's loud hiss in reply.

Things had started out innocently enough, sure. Harry had entered, seeing Ginny laying in the damp semi-circle in front of a monstrously large stone head. Harry knew it was Slytherin without a doubt, as the man's face was plastered everywhere down in the dark abyss he had been wandering through for the past twenty minutes. Running up, Harry had checked Ginny's wrist for a pulse. Finding one, albeit a *faint* one, Harry got to his feet and was about to think of the best way to take her back with him when Riddle had entered.

From there, things had quickly spiralled downward. Harry was told of how Riddle was behind everything, both past and present, concerning the Chamber's opening and the basilisk's release. Apparently, the creatures had phenomenally long lifespans, though Harry couldn't imagine how on earth something like that would stay alive for fifty years without anything to eat. Even taking hibernation into account, the timeframe for it was desperately screwed up.

Riddle had then gone into a thankfully long, boring spiel about who he really was. While this came as a complete shock to Harry, it also

gave the Ravenclaw time to think about his next move. Obviously, Riddle wasn't intending for either of them to escape with their lives. And unless Tonks blasted clear a good-enough hole, it would be pointless to try running, anyway.

All of this had degraded into Harry trying to hex Riddle senseless. But his magic proved to be less than successful on the Dark Wizard's memory. Harry had ended up on the ground, wandless. It had been picked up by Riddle... and he didn't seem to be too keen on returning it.

Rushing into one of the many large pipes that branched off from the main path, Harry flattened himself into the first small opening he could, hoping that the basilisk wouldn't sense him there. Out of all the bad days he had had in the last year, this one definitely topped them all. He was powerless, had a honking big beast chasing him, a madman whose bloody *memory* wanted him dead, and he was lacking any form of backup whatsoever.

Feeling the tunnel shake slightly, Harry ducked further back into the shadows and held his breath. A moment later, the giant serpent slithered past disturbingly fast. Harry bolted from his hiding spot, knowing that the thing could never turn around in a space it could barely even fit into. But instead of running out of the pipe, he followed after the basilisk. By the time it got out and turned back around, Harry would either be hiding in another hole or running off down another branching path.

'Think, dammit!' Harry thought to himself as he quietly walked a few paces behind the now-slowed basilisk. For whatever reason, the serpent had literally slowed to a crawl and seemed to be inspecting its surroundings better. *'Huge monster, no arsenal at my disposal, no reinforcements, never told Tonks I loved her... having a wonderful time of it today...'*

Thankfully, Harry's luck decided to throw him a bone once again. A small opening - too small for the basilisk to get into, certainly - opened up as the large snake continued down the tunnel. Harry peered down it. It was dark, it seemed to go on a fair distance... Harry weighed his options. He could either risk fate again by continuing to

follow the basilisk, or he could head into the smaller tunnel and risk possibly getting trapped.

Harry rushed into the tunnel.

He could hear Riddle yelling at the basilisk in Parseltongue as it emerged. The Dark Lord's younger self wasn't happy that his giant death beast continued to *not* kill things. Meanwhile, Harry had found the other end of the smaller tunnel. Like the larger one, it branched off in two directions. There wasn't any water flowing through this one, however, like there had been with the previous one. On one hand, it could let Harry be stealthy. On the other, so could anything else that could fit into it. And unfortunately enough for Harry, the small tunnel had opened up a fair amount. It wasn't so small anymore. Harry was certain that the basilisk couldn't get into it, but he wasn't about to wait in one place to find out.

When he emerged, he found himself back down near the main chamber's entrance. Well, that was just *great*. The basilisk wasn't anywhere in sight, but Riddle still loomed over Ginny's body. Harry took off running towards them. He needed to get his wand and he needed to get Ginny, basilisk or no.

For whatever reason, Riddle wasn't attacking. Harry figured it was because he wasn't entirely 'whole' yet. He still needed some kind of catalyst to trigger his memory phasing into reality properly. Whatever that was, Harry didn't want to know. He had a sinking suspicion death was involved, however.

Just as he knelt down beside Ginny to once again check her pulse, - still weak - something happened. Harry could almost sense something bad approaching. He knew things weren't quite right. But, as he glanced over his shoulder, he saw just how bad they were.

Gilderoy Lockhart, quite conscious, had entered the chamber. Just behind him floated Tonks, apparently out cold. Lockhart's wand was out and aimed slightly over one shoulder. As he approached Harry, he glanced between him, Riddle, and Ginny. Keeping a safe distance away, Lockhart smirked. "Well, well, well... what do we have here?"

"You...!" Harry began. But, unable to quite properly express the flurry of emotions that had entered his system, was unable to say more than that.

"Ahh... you must be the 'Professor Lockhart' that Miss Weasley spoke of." Said Riddle, stepping around Harry and walking towards the older man. "Hard to miss someone such as yourself. Tell me... why are you here?"

"And who might *you* be?" Asked Lockhart, setting Tonks down none too easily as he aimed his wand forward and at Riddle, who simply smirked in response. Getting no answer, Lockhart continued, "Not going to speak, are you? We'll see about that..."

But Harry knew the real reason that Riddle was smirking. So silently that it was frightening, the basilisk had emerged from the pipes again, slowly creeping up behind Lockhart. Warning sirens were blaring in Harry's head. Tonks was behind Lockhart. Tonks was in mortal danger. Tonks would die if he didn't do something.

"**BEHIND YOU!**" Harry finally cried, his voice coming back, at last. "The basilisk's behind you, you idiot! Get Tonks out of here! **NOW!**"

Lockhart's glance slid from Riddle to Harry, a chuckle slipping from his mouth. "Come now, dear boy... Even in the wizarding world, that's the oldest trick in the book."

"You assume he's lying." Riddle said, his smile growing as his eyes moved from Lockhart to the basilisk, which was now raising up higher.

"Your little friend in on it, is he?" Lockhart began, shaking his head. "I don't know what kind of game you two think you're playing, but I assure you..."

A number of things proceeded to happen. Harry had bolted past Riddle, snatching his wand from the young Dark Lord in the process. Lockhart, thinking Harry had gone mad and was charging him, shot off a stunner. Harry brought up a shield, thanking the fates that Lockhart was so horrible at regular magic, and shot past the man. While Harry levitated Tonks up and grabbed at her hand to help things along, the reflected stunner smashed into the basilisk's face,

causing it to let out an unholy roar. This, in turn, caused Lockhart to go ghostly pale and finally turn around.

Harry had been careful to keep his gaze down after seeing the basilisk start to emerge. He was no fool. Lockhart, for the first time in his life, didn't seem to be, either. Seeing the massive body of the basilisk, he let out an ear-piercing shriek and took off running, leaving Harry and the two girls behind.

He didn't get far.

The basilisk, angry now, whirled around and let out another roar as it took off after the Defense professor. Lockhart was running full tilt back towards the door at the far end of the chamber. Harry watched in a strange mixture of horror and fascination. Lockhart made it to the door, the basilisk hot on his heels. But just as he got the large door thrown open, something blasted past him in the opposite direction, knocking him backwards onto the stone floor.

And, while Lockhart's gut-wrenching screams couldn't be ignored, Harry's gaze was at least broken, so he didn't have to watch the basilisk pick the man up and gulp him down in one swift motion. His eyes, trained from two years' worth of Quidditch, had been tracking what had caused Lockhart to falter. But before he could open his mouth to say anything about it, the phoenix had dropped something at his feet and had turned back around. Either Fawkes was leaving him with just the Sorting Hat to finish the battle, or he was going off to fight the basilisk himself.

"This is the best Dumbledore could offer?" Laughed Riddle, watching as the headmaster's phoenix flew at the basilisk. "A song bird and an old, tattered hat?"

Harry, who had placed Tonks next to Ginny, grabbed at the Hat and gave it a once-over. There didn't seem to be any kind of weapon hidden in it. It didn't even seem to be chatty at the moment. It just seemed like a normal, old wizarding hat. What on earth would Fawkes bring it to him for, though? Did Dumbledore think that, if Harry put on the hat, he could *amuse* Riddle and the basilisk to death?

His deductive skills were interrupted when a horrible shriek echoed throughout the chamber. Without thinking, Harry's head jerked up. Once again, the fates had decided to take it easy on him. For, although the basilisk was facing towards him once more, there was no longer any cause for concern in looking at the creature. Fawkes was flying around the creature, almost tauntingly, as blood poured from the spots where its eyes had previously been. Fawkes had pecked them both out.

"My song bird beat your death snake." Harry commented aside to Riddle, who seemed almost livid at this point.

"Don't you *dare* think it's defeated yet!" Riddle growled. And then, yelling at the basilisk, he said, "*You don't **NEED** to see! You can sniff them both out! Now **KILL THEM! ALL of them!***"

The basilisk, though still emitting horrible noises of pain, seemed to react almost against its will at Riddle's orders. It stopped writhing about _____ and, _____ instead, began sniffing the air.

Knowing he had to do something to get the creature away from the girls, Harry rushed towards it, wand in one hand, Sorting Hat in the other. As he drew closer, he called out, "Fawkes! Get the girls the hell out of here! Can you do that?"

The phoenix let out a melodic trill and took off in a burst of fire towards the two girls. Riddle tried blocking the bird, but was simply too slow to do so. Fawkes landed between Tonks and Ginny, one claw on each girl's arm. With another melodic trill, this time accompanied by a huge, bright flare, the three were gone. The diary, which had been barely in Ginny's unconscious grip to begin with, fell back to the floor. Harry only dimly took note of this.

"Over here!" He yelled, shooting a few quick spells at the basilisk's pecked-out eyes. The serpent let out louder roars of pain, thrashing about wildly. Feeling much more confident, Harry took off into one of the many tunnels that littered the sides of the room. "After me, you bloody python! Come and get me!"

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"Albus, where do you think Fawkes could have gone?" Asked Professor McGonagall.

"I can only guess, Minerva." Said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling slightly. "But I have a feeling that we shall know soon enough."

The two were in the headmaster's office, discussing Hogwarts' future... or rather, its seeming lack thereof. Their conversation had been interrupted when Dumbledore's phoenix had awakened with a start, let out a shrill cry, and flew from his perch. After stealing the Sorting Hat, the song bird had simply vanished in a shower of flames.

That had been almost a half an hour ago.

McGonagall suspected that Dumbledore knew jolly well where his phoenix had left to. He always seemed to know exactly what was going on within Hogwarts' walls. It was both a comforting and a slightly creepy thought to the Transfiguration teacher. But the woman's ponderings were shattered, however, as once again a blazing distraction derailed her train of thought. Just behind the chair she was sitting in, halfway between herself and the door to the stairway leading to Dumbledore's office, stood Fawkes with two damp, dirty, and quite unconscious young girls on either side of him.

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"Nnng... Good morning!"

"It's the bloody evening... and don't act so damned chipper!"

Fred Weasley blinked, staring up at his twin in confusion for a moment before glancing around. "So it is. And why shouldn't I be chipper, then?"

"Because you've been petrified for months, you stupid sod! We've been worried sick about you!" Declared George, nodding aside towards Ron, who was sitting in a chair next to Fred's bed.

"Petrified?" Fred repeated. It was only then did the redhead truly take in what was going on around him. Several students seemed to be

getting more than the average amount of attention. "George...? What's going on? ...And where's Ginny?"

George and Ron exchanged dark looks. This caused Fred to sit up a bit more, looking between them. "...George."

Running a hand back through his hair, George murmured, "You, and everyone else currently in here, were victims of a basilisk. Or rather, you were almost victims. Everyone was lucky enough to not get a clear look at it. If you had, you would have been dead on the spot."

"And Ginny?" Fred repeated. "Why isn't she here?"

"She's been taken into the Chamber of Secrets." Ron said, quietly.

"The what?" Fred asked.

Once quick explanation later and Fred was being held down by his brothers. "Geroff, you two! We've got to go get her!"

"Harry and Tonks are taking care of that!" George argued, shoving his brother back down and drawing his wand. "You're doing well to be moving about right now. You aren't going on *any* rescue missions!"

"You should have more faith in them." Came a voice from nearby. Turning, the three Weasleys saw Solieyu standing near one of the privacy curtains that had been pulled back. "I do."

"You look a right state, Leon." Fred commented. "What happened to *you*?"

"Long story. Not getting into it here." Solieyu commented. Glancing over his shoulder briefly, he nodded once, then walked closer to Fred's bed. "Anyway. you should believe in Harry. He's strong. I think he's much stronger than he lets on, truthfully. If anyone could stop the basilisk, it's him."

"Still... it's been awhile since they left." Ron commented, voice still distant.

"Yes. It has." Said George.

Any morbid thoughts the group might have had, however, were stymied as the doors to the hospital wing burst open. Dumbledore strode in, levitating both Ginny and Tonks in front of him. As he entered, he called, "Poppy! Severus!"

Both Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape - who had been there helping to administer the antidote along with Professor Sprout - looked up at the headmaster's words. Madam Pomfrey's gasp was drowned out as, at once, the three Weasley brothers caught sight of their little sister and let out shocked cries. At the same time, something deep in the pit of Solieyu's stomach tied itself in a knot at the sight of Tonks. As Dumbledore floated the two girls onto beds, he could only close his eyes and pray that, wherever Harry still was, he was winning.

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"I *hate* you!" Harry hissed.

"Not very fond of you either, at the moment, Potter." Replied the Sorting Hat in a monotone voice.

"Why did Fawkes even *bring* you down here?"

"Can't say."

"Great, so you're clueless, too."

"No, I mean I literally can't say why I was brought here. I *know* why, of course, but I'm forbidden from speaking of it. This is one of life's tests, Potter. You have to work out why I'm here on your own." Said the Hat.

"Once again: I hate you."

"Quiet!"

Harry slammed himself back into the furthest corner of the tiny tunnel he had been hiding in. The basilisk was passing by every so often, but hadn't quite picked up on where he was yet. Every time the serpent passed out of range, Harry and the Sorting Hat began

arguing again. It had started speaking once Harry had crept into his hiding spot, berating him for not using his head like a proper Ravenclaw.

Once the creature was most likely out of earshot again, Harry growled, "Look, if I die down here, that thing's probably gonna take you with me, since I'll see to it to keep a good grip on you if your riddles get me killed!"

"Nothing I've said has been a riddle, Potter. I believe the Riddle out there is more the concern, anyway." Said the Hat.

"You think I don't *know* that?" Harry snapped. "But how do you kill a *memory*? What am I going to do, wish hopefully that he'll fade away? Lock him in an empty room somewhere and leave him for dead? Oh, I know, I can pine to him in the damned diary and--!"

"Now you're on the right track." Interrupted the Hat.

"The diary? ...That's right ...Riddle's memory came from the diary. So reason stands that, if I somehow destroy it, he'll fade, too?" Harry asked.

"Can't say."

"Have I told you how *deeply* I hate you yet?"

"Not quite."

"...Anyway, the problem is," Harry began, shutting his eyes and trying to ignore the sounds of an obviously-angry Tom Riddle yelling at the basilisk in its own language. "What am I going to destroy it with? It's not like I've studied up on heavily-offensive magical spells. And I somehow doubt a magical diary is going to burn..."

"Shame you don't have something to pierce it with." Said the Hat in bored tones.

"Pierce... that's it, I can shove something *through* it! Wizards seem to have some odd weakness with not protecting things physically..." Harry said, shaking his head slowly. "Can't burn it, blow it up, or

shatter it after a good freezing, but you can take a pair of scissors to it just fine, I'll bet. ...But where am I gonna get something sharp down *here*? I'm not good enough in Transfiguration to get myself a sword or anything..."

"You could always punch the snake, knock one of its fangs loose." Offered the Sorting Hat.

"Oh, that's real funny." Harry scowled. "Did you miss the part where I said I'd take you down with me if I got eaten?"

"Who's being funny? Knock its teeth out. Can't do much then, can it? Blind and toothless creatures have a bit of a disadvantage, wouldn't you say?" Asked the Hat.

"Well sure, but--" Harry went silent for awhile as the basilisk made another long, slow pass by. "-- how? I told you, I don't know any kind of truly destructive spells! I'd need something much stronger than my wand to take down something like that thing, anyway..."

"Ahh, and now we're getting more to the point of things..." Said the Hat, cryptically.

"Huh?"

"A weapon, Potter. You need something stronger to take down that thing and get us both out of here once and for all." Said the Hat.

And then something smashed into Harry's foot, causing him to cry out. He quickly clamped a hand over his mouth, then looked down to see what had hit him. Seemingly coming from inside of the Sorting Hat was what appeared to be...

"A stick. Is this some kinda joke? You want me to poke the basilisk to death, is that it?" Harry asked.

"Think, Potter! You're a Ravenclaw, aren't you? Sorted you myself, and I'm never wrong... though you are making me doubt myself right now." Said the Hat.

Harry lifted the Sorting Hat up further, revealing the rest of the 'stick,' as Harry had put it. Grabbing it, however, caused a surge of energy to spark through Harry's body. Dropping the object, he stared at the Sorting Hat. "...You're kidding, right?"

"I try not to. It makes me look like an idiot." Said the Hat. "It is what you think it is. Will yourself to channel through it. It has more than enough power on its own to serve you well, just as it did its previous owner."

"Wonderful."

Harry pocketed the Sorting Hat, much to its irritation, and grabbed what he knew was a wizard's staff. Keeping still for a moment, Harry quickly escaped his hiding spot, making his way back out to the main chamber once more. He was thankfully spit out next to where Ginny and Tonks had been laying. Riddle was standing nearby, staring down at his diary with an annoyed look on his face. The fact that Riddle couldn't touch it seemed odd to Harry.

"Your friend still off crashing into things?" Harry asked, using the staff more as a walking stick than anything else.

Riddle frowned when he saw Harry. "Where did you get that?" He asked.

"This? Oh... nowhere. Just found it laying around." Harry said, shrugging.

"GET OUT HERE!" Riddle suddenly roared, turning his head and staring off towards one of the pipes leading off from the room. A moment later and the blinded basilisk came slithering out of it. **"He's right here! Kill him!"**

"Remember, Potter..." Said the Hat in a muffled voice. "Will yourself to channel through it. It's no different than a wand; only bigger. Aim and fire."

"Aim and fire." Harry repeated, quietly. The basilisk lurched ever closer, raising itself up as it caught wind of Harry, at last. It let out a deep hiss and began closing in faster, causing Harry's heart to speed

up. Quickly grasping the staff in both hands, he aimed right for the creature's head. He could feel the energy circulating out of his hands, through the staff, and back into his hands again.

The only problem was, amplified magic or no, he still didn't know any really strong offensive magic. He was better at defensive stuff. And he had the distinct feeling that a shield spell wasn't going to mean squat against a gigantic snake.

The basilisk reared back and threw its head forward, its mouth open wide. Harry's eyes squeezed shut and he pushed all thoughts from his head saved one: *'KILL IT!'*

The energy surging through the staff increased at once, causing Harry to open his eyes just in time to see the reaction. The tip of the staff illuminated brightly with a deep blue light, which quickly shot up and smashed into the roof of the basilisk's mouth. A squealing hiss was all the creature was able to produce before the light drilled through its head, shooting out of the top and into the ceiling above, where it continued to bore upwards.

So caught up in the hypnotic beam that had killed the monster, Harry only barely realized that the thing was falling forward. He pulled the staff off to one side, though it was incredibly difficult to do so. The beam of light sliced through half of the serpent's head, causing parts of its mouth to hang to one side. Realizing he had to move, Harry let go of the staff and leapt to one side. Its source of power cut off, the staff went lifeless once more, clattering to the stone floor. The basilisk crashed to the floor a split second later.

Harry let out a scream.

Turning, he saw one of the sliced-away portions of the basilisk's upper jaw pinning his leg to the floor. What was worse, one of the fangs had gone in one side of the back of his right leg and out the other. The pain was greater than anything Harry had ever experienced in his life. At that moment, every single beating he had received at the hands of his relatives flashed through his mind. And in all of the horrible, nightmare-inducing memories, nothing could compare to the pain he was in now.

"Grab the staff!" Called the Sorting Hat, still muffled from inside Harry's robes. "Break yourself out!"

His vision blurred from the amount of pain he was in, Harry saw the staff laying nearby. He reached out for it and, once more, the energy flow coursed through him. It numbed the pain just enough for him to twist slightly and aim at the fang that was piercing his leg. Instead of a beam of light, however, this time only a burst of blue light flew out. It collided with the top of the fang, blasting it free of the basilisk's mouth. It also served to blast away at most of the thing's already mutilated jaw, causing bits of basilisk meat to splatter the nearby floor.

Dropping the staff again, Harry gasped as he sat up and grabbed at the fang. He still had one monster to kill before he could die. As Riddle taunted him and asked how it felt to have basilisk poison slowly killing him, Harry ripped the fang free, letting out another awful scream. Blood poured from the gaping wound, soaking his pants and the fang that had been removed.

Literally dragging himself across the floor, Harry made his way towards the diary. Riddle was too busy taunting Harry to realize that he *wasn't* coming for him. By the time he did notice, it was too late. Harry had raised the bloody fang, bringing it down and piercing through the diary's cover. Blank ink sprayed from the diary at the same time Riddle let out a scream of his own. Harry stabbed the book over and over, more ink spilling out over his fingers. When the ink ran out, Riddle was gone - destroyed along with his precious diary.

Rolling over onto his back, Harry stared up at the ceiling. He had won, but at what cost? Who knew if Ginny and Tonks were even alright. The basilisk was dead, but it had gotten the last laugh in. Riddle's memory had faded away, the power of the diary gone. Letting his eyes slip shut, Harry smiled sadly. Ever since he had left Tonks behind with Lockhart, he had made a promise to himself. When he got out, *if* he got out, he would tell her. And now it looked as if he was going to die on the cold, stone floor, next to the basilisk.

As his consciousness slowly ebbed away, Harry only barely took note of the sudden surge in warmth around his body.

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Author's Notes: Chomp.

Y helo thar wizarding staff lolz. If Godric had a sword for bitch-smiting things, it'd make sense for the smartest of the Hogwarts founders to have a staff, right? I have great things planned for that staff. But that's waaaaay down the line. It seems Harry's beginning to get a little collection of random stuff, huh? Even if the staff, like the sword in canon, will end up in Dumbledore's office... the fact that it came to Harry is important. I have a feeling Gryffindor's sword will play a role in the downfall of Voldemort in the canon material, after all.

So! What have we here? A nice little twist to the original stuff, wouldn't you say? Shame I can't have some big, hulking monster come along and take care of the other couple of annoying professors, huh? I've planned Lockhart's death for awhile, but what people don't know is that, in the original draft of the R-Series, Harry and Tonks were still Gryffindors and Dean Thomas was the third member of the trio. I had the whole of first and second year planned out with those schematics. But then I thought, "No, Gryffindor Harry is well overdone. And as interesting as Dean's backstory and home life seem to be, I think I can do something a bit more interesting."

I briefly toyed with putting them in Hufflepuff. That woulda been amusing. Voldie appears on the back of Quirrell's head, Harry hangs his head and whines, "We're gonna *diiiiiie*..."

I also toyed with Harry killing Riddle, which would have left the basilisk wild and enraged. Harry and Tonks escape back up into the school and get chased around by the hulking beast for awhile before help arrives. But that seemed too... I dunno, Action Movie-ish to me.

So this is what you get! VERY little conversation, a lot of descriptive text, and a painful, cliffhanger ending. But hey, this update comes what? A day or two after Chapter 15? Considering it usually takes me a few weeks to write, I'd say y'all got a fair trade on this one.

For the record, I DID end up combining two chapters into one. So it looks like we're two chapters away from the end. Thank Merlin.

Chapter 17 – Awakening

"And, as you may have all noticed," Began Dumbledore, smiling, "we have a new student in our midst! She has been transferred here from the wizarding school Durmstrang as per her parents' wishes..."

Tonks was staring, wide-eyed, at the new student, her face paling slightly.

"Tonks?" Harry whispered, nudging her. "Tonks! What's wrong? Do you know her?"

All he got in response was a slow nod.

"She will be a sixth year and has already been Sorted into Slytherin House. I wish for you all to show Miss Bellatrix Lestrange the same courtesy you would show any of your other fellow students." Finished the headmaster.

Bellatrix looked more than happy to escape the eyes of the school staring at her, walking swiftly to the Slytherin table and sitting down near one end, where she was promptly met by Draco Malfoy. Bellatrix's eyes lit up as he spoke to her.

FLASH.

"Find me funny, do you! I think I'm going to have to whip you back into shape! You never used to be so rebellious! You took your beatings like a man!" Vernon growled, stalking towards Harry and Tonks.

Before he could get there - before he got anywhere near Harry - he was halted. It was to be expected, of course. No one in the house would get to them. No one would hurt Tonks again. No one would hurt HIM again. Anger swelled deep in Harry's chest and, as he threw his head back and screamed, Number Four, Privet Drive exploded.

FLASH.

The chain binding Harry's ankles to one another shattered into dozens of smaller fragments. At the same moment, the enchanted

handcuffs also shot off. As he brought his arms around, Harry hissed out a disarming spell in Parseltongue. This caught the guards that were flanking him, sending them flying backwards and kicking their wands high into the air. Harry grabbed both as they fell back down.

The room was still. Even Dumbledore looked like he was on the edge of getting to his feet and reacting, if the situation called for it.

Harry took a step forward, twirling the wands between his fingers as he moved. "I don't know what madness has taken control of what little brain you ever had, Fudge... But in case you hadn't noticed, I'm on the same side as you people are. And I will not be prosecuted because without me, all of you are going to die slow, painful, and horrifying deaths. Do you understand that?"

FLASH.

"Where'd you end up?"

"Effing Brazil, if you'll believe it."

"Brazil!"

"Yeah, I didn't quite get it, either. I guess we didn't really think about *where* I would end up."

Rolling her eyes once more, Pansy muttered, "Good job, O Wise and Powerful Potter."

"Shut up." Said Harry, scowling.

FLASH!

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

The last thing Harry remembered feeling was the excruciating pain flowing through his right leg. Whatever type of poison the basilisk was laced with, it was some mighty potent stuff. Of course, there was the nice, warm feeling just before he had blacked out... but he had naturally assumed it was due to the onset of death. Harry had no real experience with dying, so he couldn't be sure of what the afterlife

really was. But one thing was most certainly true - the afterlife sure as hell shouldn't smell of vanilla. On the up side, that giant shadow in his dreams - most likely the basilisk, now that he thought about it - wasn't around anymore.

"Dammiiiiit."

This single, groaned word seemed to serve as a starter pistol. The sheer amount of voices, noise, and movement that erupted around him caused him to wince in pain. Didn't they all realize that the very *last* thing a guy who had almost died needed was much rejoicing? Especially when he was right beaten up.

"I would take points for language," Squeaked a familiar voice, "but I think, given the circumstances, I can allow it."

"Thanks." Muttered Harry. With a deep sigh, he opened his eyes partially. As he had expected, he was once again in the hospital wing. Or at least, that's where he assumed he was. Everything was so blurry without his glasses on. Reaching over to the annoyingly-familiar spot on the nearby table where they always got placed, Harry slipped them on. "Gang's all here, then, huh?"

"Almost." Said Solieyu, who was leaning against the railing at the foot of the bed. "Tonks is off eating and the twins are making sure she *does*. And, of course, our dear Professor Lockhart couldn't join us today."

Chuckling darkly, Harry shook his head. "Tried to warn the big idiot. Thought me and Riddle were conspiring against him or somethin'."

During the silence that followed, Harry allowed his eyes to better adjust to the thankfully low light and take note of those who *were* around. Professor Flitwick was on a chair to his left. Dumbledore was down by Solieyu. Luna Lovegood was *also* down by Solieyu, clinging to his left arm, much to the older boy's general annoyance. To his right was a trio of empty chairs. Harry assumed Tonks and the twins had been sitting there.

"Well," Harry continued, seeing that no one apparently wanted to strike up a conversation. "How long have I been out this time? Anyone wanna fill me in on what's been goin' on?"

"I believe I can answer those questions, if I may." Said Dumbledore, smiling pleasantly. "You have 'been out' for a mere sixteen hours, during which, I might add, Miss Tonks has refused to leave your side." Waiting a moment just for awkwardness' sake, (or so Harry figured) the headmaster continued, "And as for what has been happening during those hours... Not much."

"Not much?" Harry echoed, cocking an eyebrow.

"Indeed." Said Dumbledore, eyes twinkling. "The victims of the basilisk were revived before you even finished your fight with the creature. Fawkes was kind enough to make a second trip into the Chamber of Secrets to retrieve you - a bit of very good timing, I should say - and I have had discussions with the appropriate places in regards to Gilderoy's death."

"You don't sound too sad to be rid of him, either." Harry noted.

"I have no idea what you mean, Harry." Said Dumbledore. "Gilderoy Lockhart was a fine man and a fine teacher."

"Yeah, and I haven't had to fight things that wanted me dead two years in a row." Harry replied, his voice laced with sarcasm.

"Have you, now?" Dumbledore said, stroking at his beard. "I must say, you have done a wonderful job at keeping our school safe, then."

Shaking his head at just how odd Dumbledore was acting, Harry closed his eyes again. After a moment, Dumbledore spoke once more, telling the crowd that Harry needed to rest a bit longer, else Madam Pomfrey would have both of their heads.

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Harry wasn't sure when he woke up next. The last thing he remembered was telling those gathered what he had been doing down in the Chamber. He must have fallen asleep, curse all the

stupid potions Madam Pomfrey insisted on forcing down his gullet. It was dark out now, and the hospital wing's lights had been turned down low. Harry didn't really mind resting so much. In fact, it felt rather nice to not have a single thing to worry about. He figured it wouldn't last, since he *did* have to return to Number Four that summer... but that was still a ways off, thankfully.

"Hi." Came a quiet voice from his right.

Smiling, Harry tilted his head to the side. "Hi yourself. Are you alright?"

Tonks nodded, moving from her chair to the edge of the bed. "I am now. Can't believe I was gone when you finally woke up the first time..."

"You should probably be resting, too. What'd that idiot do to you, anyway?" Harry asked.

"I was clearing rubble away and then next thing I know, I hear him hiss in my ear that it was a mistake to ever try to control him. Stuff went black immediately after." Tonks said, frowning. "Leon related the rest of what happened to me, though..."

"Good... I don't want to remember what happened down there..." Harry said, frowning. "My leg still stings... Dumbledore told me Fawkes cried on the wound and it just sort of...healed up. Must have somehow dealt with the poison in me, too..."

"M'Glad you're okay." Tonks murmured. "Been worried 'boutcha."

Noticing that she was gripping at the bedsheets rather forcefully, Harry reached out and placed a hand over one of hers. "Relax. Everything's fine now. I'm alive, you're alive, Ginny's alive...the people who were petrified were all restored. and now we don't have to deal with that twit in Defense."

"Still..." Tonks said. "You don't get to scare me like that anymore."

"Scare *you*? How'd you think I felt when I saw Lockhart float you into the Chamber? I'm glad the idiot died. It's only as much as he

deserved. He lied, cheated, and faked his way to the top, then almost got you killed... if the basilisk hadn't, I probably would've given it a shot."

"No killing in the name of your best friend." Tonks said, poking Harry's arm.

"Aww, why not?"

"As sweet as it would be to have you defending my honor, I won't have you becoming a murderer for it." Tonks said.

Sniffing melodramatically, Harry replied, "Oh, very well. If I mustn't, then."

"Seriously... I'm glad you're alright, Harry..." Tonks said, voice quiet once more. "Fred and George barely got me to eat anything... I tried, but I kept thinking about you in here. Madam Pomfrey couldn't find anything wrong with you, aside from the awful leg wound..."

"I was just tired, I think... I haven't slept well lately. I've been having these weird dreams lately... some of it's seemed entirely too real to me." Harry said.

"Good weird dreams or bad weird dreams?" Tonks asked.

"Mostly nightmares... though there have been a few good moments." Harry said, his eyes locking with Tonks'.

"...Harry?" Tonks asked, feeling her cheeks warm up as Harry continued to gaze up at her.

Sitting up, Harry smiled tiredly. "I'm sorry for worrying you. Seems I've done that a lot this year, huh?"

Nibbling on her lower lip, Tonks shrugged. "S'okay. You always seem to come through fine in the end. Like you said, you're the hero, right? Heroes always end up fine."

"Does that make you my damsel in distress?" Harry asked, raising his eyebrows. "Princess Nymmy?"

"Oi oi..." Tonks muttered, shaking her head. "None of that now."

"But it's cute." Harry argued, grinning.

"It most certainly is *NOT* cute." Tonks grumbled. "I really wish mum would've named me something normal."

"Who wants normal?" Harry asked, giving Tonks' hand a soft squeeze. "I like things different."

Blushing, Tonks looked off. "Yeah, well... how would you feel if your parents had named you... I dunno... Archibald or somethin'?"

"I'd go by Archie and hex anyone who called me by my full name." Harry said. "But yooou... do not like people even shortening your first name like that."

Scowling, Tonks muttered, "What're my options? Nymmy or Dora? Both sound silly."

"Well... Dora might, but you don't look like a 'Dora' to me. You're definitely a 'Nymmy,' though." Harry said, smiling crookedly now.

"Shut up. Ooh, I wish you had a longer name so I could shorted *it* to something silly and annoy *you*..." Tonks said, frustrated.

"It isn't *that* annoying, is it?" Harry asked.

"Is." Tonks mumbled.

"And yet I seem to be the only person other than your mum who can get away with calling you that." Harry observed. "You've cursed anyone else who's tried. Even Leon had to dodge a shot the one time *he* tried it. Got a soft spot for me using it, Nymmy?"

Whining quietly, Tonks smacked Harry on the arm. "No! No, of course I don't. Don't have the slightest clue whatcha mean." She said, mumbling it all very quickly under her breath.

"I think you do." Said Harry. "Especially since you're blushing right now."

"Not blushing." Tonks said, turning her head away.

Harry moved his hand from Tonks' then. And, before she could look back to see why, she found herself with two arms wrapped around her midsection, tugging her back against Harry's body. Eyes growing wide, she only barely registered Harry resting his head over onto her right shoulder. Eyes closed, Harry whispered, "You want to know the last thing I thought about before I blacked out down in the Chamber?"

"What?" Tonks asked, finding herself very short on breath for some reason.

"You." Harry murmured. "All I could think about was how sorry I was for not being able to make it out alive... And how I'd never get to be this close to you again. Most of all, though, I was angry with myself for never telling you the one thing that mattered most."

"You don't have to." Tonks whispered, her throat feeling tight all of a sudden. "I already know."

"That doesn't change the fact that I never got to tell you. I tried before we went down there... but I just couldn't spit it out..." Harry said.

Leaning back against Harry a little more, Tonks asked, "And I told you I felt the same way, remember? Why... why are you acting so weird, Harry?"

"Love does that to a guy, I guess." Harry said, chuckling weakly. "Sorry... it's just... down there, blacking out, with nothing but a giant snake for company, thinking I was going to die... lotta weird things went through my head."

"No melodrama for you. Bad Harry!" Tonks said, feeling more relaxed now. Turning slightly, she gave Harry the evil eye. "You're alive, I'm alive, you saved the day again, and we're probably going to have a dirty great party for you once you get out of here. We have all summer to figure out how to say things properly."

Blinking, Harry nodded. "I suppose you're right. Do I still get to call you Nymmy?"

"Only if you want another bruise on your arm." Tonks stated, blandly.

"It's worth it." Harry said, leaning in and kissing Tonks on the cheek quickly.

Flushing again, Tonks swatted Harry on the arm again. "And stop making me turn red and feel all giggly!"

"What? You don't like when I do that? You've kissed me too, y'know." Harry pointed out. "In fact, didn't you kiss *me* first?"

"That's entirely beside the point." Tonks sniffed. "And it's different with me. I'm a girl. I get to flirt."

"And I don't?" Harry asked.

"No. No you don't. Only I may flirt." Tonks said in her most pompous voice.

"Whatever you say, Nymmy." Harry said, turning his head to yawn.

"Still tired?" Tonks asked. "S'pretty late, y'know. You should get back to sleep."

"Much as I don't want to, I think you're right." Harry said, sighing. Slipping his arms from around Tonks, he flopped back and frowned. "I've done well, not having my glasses on all this time."

"You have." Tonks agreed. "That embrace of yours could've ended up with us both being horribly embarrassed. And you with a bloody nose."

Snorting, Harry shook his head. "Hey, I'm not *entirely* blind. I could still make out when you blushed, after all."

"Oh, go back to sleep already and quit tormenting me." Tonks said, sticking her tongue out.

"If you insist. But only if you go get something to eat and get a good night's sleep, too. You've had your moment with me now, so your stomach should feel more up to it." Harry said.

"It's a deal." Tonks said. And, as she got up to leave, she leaned over and gave Harry a kiss just below his scar. "Sweet dreams."

"That isn't fair." Harry yawned. "But you too, Nymmy."

"You're pressin' your luck on the 'Nymmys,' Potter." Tonks said, grinning as she stepped away from the bed. "Now go to sleep!"

"Yes yes, I'm going, I'm going." Harry said, rolling over onto his right side and curling up slightly. "And tell them that if they're gonna have a party in my honor, that I want one of those cakes like your mum made that one time."

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"So she's still there, wolfing down food, huh?" Harry asked, chuckling.

"Mmhmm." Came Solieyu's reply. "Ever since you woke up, her appetite's back in full force. Apparently, it's trying to make up for lost time."

"Wish I could be down there. Dumbledore picked an odd time to call me to his office." Harry muttered.

"Probably just wants to go over everything again on his own, make sure you're really okay. You should put more trust in him, Harry." Solieyu said. "He wouldn't do anything to harm you."

"Save for knowingly sending me back to the hellhole I grew up in." Harry said, scowling. "Sorry, but it's hard to really find respect for a guy who can't work out how to ward one of my friend's houses."

"Blood magic can't be transferred." Solieyu said, shrugging. "And I doubt any wards the headmaster could create would be quite as potent."

"On that note," Harry said, trying to steer the topic away from his home life. "You seem to be doing better."

"Yes, well... I've taken that horrible potion again and everything is seemingly back to normal." Solieyu replied.

"Except now *you* have a Ron-ish tagalong sometimes?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Shut up."

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"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Dumbledore smiled, nodding as Harry entered. Offering him the chair opposite his, as well as offering a small dish of candy, the headmaster replied, "Indeed I did. Come, sit down. Care for a shebert lemon? Perhaps a toadstool taffy?"

"Anything to get the taste of all those potions out of my mouth." Harry said, taking what seemed to be an ordinary peppermint from the bowl. After a few seconds, he added, "Normal candy?"

"Most of it." Said Dumbledore. "Sometimes a candy is simply a candy. Now, on to business... Are you doing alright?"

"Well as can be expected, considering." Harry said. "I'm not as tired anymore, but aside from that... I dunno. I'm just glad everything's over with, sir."

"As am I, Harry. As am I. Now then, I believe I have something for you here." Dumbledore said, lifting up some papers on his desk and grabbing an envelope, which he extended towards Harry. As the boy took it, he continued, "This is from Molly and Arthur Weasley. They came by during one of your, if you'll pardon the term, sleeping spells to check on Ginny and Fred. While Molly almost insisted to wake you up to, undoubtably, crush you in one of her patented embraces... I somehow managed to convince her to let you sleep. Instead, I suggested writing a letter of thanks to you, which they took to heart."

Blinking, Harry opened the envelope and read the letter it held. "It's certainly long, isn't it?" He said, goggling at how much Mrs. Weasley had managed to write out.

"So it would seem." Said Dumbledore. "Beyond that, though, Harry..."

Looking up, Harry saw that the headmaster had set Riddle's diary on his desk. "How did you...?"

"Fawkes brought it when he went back to pick you up." Said Dumbledore. "I thought it better for me to keep it somewhere safe, rather than having it lay, unguarded, in the Chamber of Secrets."

"Do you think it's safe now, sir?" Harry asked, picking it up and flipping through its destroyed pages after removing the ink and blood-stained basilisk fang that still pierced through it.

"As safe as can be expected." Dumbledore said. "I'm not entirely sure what to do with the fang. I'm sure Severus could get *some* use out of it. As you can imagine, basilisk fangs are very rare, Harry. Their use in potions is rather vast, as well. They sell for quite a high price."

Feeling as if the headmaster wasn't just blowing wind his way, Harry glanced up. "I see. Would you mind terribly if I kept this one? A memento, of sorts. Stuff like this helps keep me in check sometimes." He said, making sure not to be so truthful as to state that he had a small shard of the Philosopher's Stone wrapped up at the bottom of his trunk.

"As you wish, Harry. Now then, as to my next--" Dumbledore began. But he was cut off as the door to his office suddenly came bursting open. Lucius Malfoy, looking quite irritated, stormed in. Directly at his heels was a house elf that looked all too familiar to Harry.

"Dumbledore, I demand to know the meaning of this!" Malfoy roared, slamming his hands down on Dumbledore's desk. "I am a very busy man and have little time to come running up to your school without having a perfectly good **REASON**! So help me, if--!"

This time, it was Malfoy cut off by Dumbledore. Holding Riddle's diary out to the man, he said, "I simply wanted to return this to you, Lucius, no need to get riled up."

Looking slightly unnerved, but doing an admirable job of hiding it, Malfoy crossed his arms. "I've no idea what you mean. I've never seen that book before in my life. Is this all you've called me for?"

"Oh? It was my understanding that this book has been in your possession for quite some time now. Has it not? Well, you must forgive an old man for being incorrect, then..." Said Dumbledore, setting the book back on his desk. "I would, however, like to say one thing, in addition. It would be wise of you, Lucius, to keep any *other* of Lord Voldemort's old possessions to yourself."

Narrowing his eyes, Lucius Malfoy turned abruptly, kicking Dobby halfway across the room as he did so. "Come. We're leaving."

After they had left the room, Harry turned back to Dumbledore. "So Malfoy's the one who got the diary into the school?"

"It would seem that way." Said Dumbledore. "Talking to Molly and Arthur, I've been told a bit of a scuffle broke out in Diagon Alley between the latter and Lucius Malfoy. I would assume that it was around then that he slipped the diary into young Ginny's other school supplies. I doubt anyone took much notice of it."

"I still wish I knew where Mr. Weasley got that toilet seat from..." Harry said, remembering the image of Arthur Weasley braining Lucius Malfoy with a toilet seat.

Chuckling quietly, Dumbledore continued, "Unfortunately, as we cannot prove for a fact that the diary once belonged to Lucius, we cannot do anything about it."

"...Actually, I think we can do *something*. It isn't much, but it'd be amusing, nonetheless." Harry began, a plan formulating in his mind. "Would you mind terribly if I took the fang *and* the diary, sir?"

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A few days later, Harry found himself standing outside the Potions classrooms, a large, filled sack at his feet. He was tired, he was quite filthy, and he was really, really hungry. Not to mention dreading what he was about to try and pull off.

Knocking, he heard Snape's voice call for him to enter. Harry did so, opening the door with one hand and hefting the sack over up with the other.

"...Potter. What have you been doing, frolicking in the mud?" Snape asked, turning his nose up at Harry's appearance.

"Actually," Harry began, walking across the room and lifting the sack up to set it on the man's desk. "I have something for you."

Making another face as Harry placed the dirty bag on his desk, on top of several papers he had been working on, Snape replied, "I am certain I have no desire to take anything from *you*, Potter."

Grinning crookedly, Harry said, "I think you should at least look inside before you say that."

Standing, Snape looked almost ready to chase Harry from his office for a moment, having drawn his wand and all. But then, he simply aimed at the bag. A flick of his wrist later and it had opened, revealing the contents. Snape blinked, leaning in and inspecting better. "...And I should assume the headmaster put you up to this?" He finally said.

"Not really." Harry said. "I mean, he gave me the idea, but I went and got the dumb things on my own. Well, Fawkes helped... I mean, I dunno how I would've gotten out again if he hadn't, but..."

"Stop your rambling, Potter!" Snape growled. "I get the point. Now the question stands as to *why* you would go back into the Chamber of Secrets, presumably with *only* a phoenix as your guardian, just to procure a sack full of basilisk fangs."

Shrugging, Harry replied, "Given that I attacked you instead of Vold--"

"Don't say his name!" Snape hissed.

"*VOLDEMORT*..." Harry finished, glaring up at the man. "...last year, I thought it was the least I could do. Professor Dumbledore said basilisk fangs were pretty rare *and* had a good number of uses in potions. Call it a peace offering. Or at least an apology."

Picking up a fang and inspecting it for awhile, Snape said, "The poison seems to be there. I take it you didn't return to the headmaster's office, at least, before coming here?"

"Not really. I had Fawkes drop me off outside. Dunno where he went after that. Probably back to Dumbledore's office." Harry shrugged. "I just wanted to drop the fangs off and go take a shower."

"Then go." Said Snape, using his wand to close and lift the bag up. Heading for his storeroom, he added, "And do not think this changes anything between us."

Nodding, Harry turned to leave. "Didn't expect it to, sir." He said. "Just figured I should let you know that I really am sorry to have chosen the wrong man last year."

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One shower later, and Harry was making his way down to the Great Hall for dinner. He had told Tonks and Solieyu of his plans earlier in the day, so he assumed they had already gone down. He still felt tired, but the shower had done much to put some life back into him. Only now his stomach was threatening to up and leave if it didn't get some food in it soon.

Just as he headed through the doors leading into the Great Hall, however, something flew at him. Letting out a surprised cry, Harry threw himself to one side. A painful **THUMP** came from where he had been standing. Turning, he saw Dobby the house elf laying on the ground, groaning and rubbing at his nose.

The headmaster, who, Harry just noticed, had been standing nearby, smiled. "It looks as if your plan has had its desired effects, Harry."

"You're free, then?" Harry asked, turning to Dobby, who was getting to his feet again.

"Oh, yes, sir!" Dobby squeaked, looking up at Harry through his large eyes.

"He insisted on coming here to wait for you." Explained Dumbledore. "He has been telling me of your bravery ever since he arrived, you know."

"Wonderful." Harry groaned. "Look, Dobby... don't say that kinda stuff, alright? It's embarrassing."

Nodding vigorously, Dobby agreed.

"So, what's to become of him now?" Asked Harry.

"I have agreed to hire Dobby on as a free elf. He will have no loyalties to me, of course..." Said Dumbledore. "But he seems very eager to start."

Dobby seemed unable of proper conversation by then, using his ears to wipe at his eyes and sniffing out how both Harry *and* Dumbledore were great men. Harry simply rolled his eyes and, as Dumbledore led Dobby out of the Great Hall to show him to the kitchens, Harry slipped over to his usual spot at the Ravenclaw table.

"Now what was *that* all about?" Tonks asked.

"It's a long and complicated story involving a lot of luck." Harry said, shaking his head slowly. "The short version is that I sent Riddle's diary to Malfoy, wrapped in a dirty, old sock. It was a long shot, but it looks like it worked."

"And you're alright with that thing being free?" Tonks asked, raising an eyebrow. "You *do* remember that he's the reason you wound up so bloodied last summer. And why you got a leg de-boned."

"I know."

"...Well, alright. If you say so." Tonks said. "Oi, look at Malfoy. He looks happy, doesn't he?"

Turning, Harry saw Draco Malfoy glaring daggers at him. The mental image of Lucius writing an angst-filled letter to his son popped into Harry's mind, causing him to snort. When Tonks and Solieyu tried to pry just what was so funny out of him, he only replied that he would tell them later.

"So," Solieyu began, after they had moved on to a different topic, "What *will* you do if Dobby shows up at your relatives' house again this summer?"

"Well," Harry said, pausing to think as he took a sip of pumpkin juice, "I guess hexing him's out of the question. Don't want to get into trouble with the Ministry. ...I guess I could take off running."

"Ooh, ooh, run towards our house!" Tonks said, bouncing.

"I was planning to do that, anyway." Harry said, glancing aside at Tonks and grinning. "You're all that keeps me sane during the summer. Hey, Leon, why don't you stop by this time? We can have some fun together. Maybe we can go over to your place for dinner some night?"

"I think my mother would like that." Solieyu said, smiling. "She's been wanting to meet the both of you, you know."

"Oh yeah? Well, that's that, then. Now then, providing Dobby *doesn't* show up, what's the plan for getting me out of Number Four this time?" Harry asked.

And with that, the trio went about constructing their summer plans.

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Author's Notes: Ehee... Last dream flashing, I promise. Well, maybe not. One or two might slip into future books. I write ahead a lot. Sometimes the ideas I choose not to include make it into these dreams. Like Bellatrix getting age regressed so she's just a little older than my version of Tonks. Now wouldn't THAT make for some interesting moments? But after talking it out with a few people, I realized how many holes I'd hafta try filling up because of it. If there's anything I hate, it's filling plotheoles caused by my changes. So no teenaged Bella for you!

And then there's the shackled Harry on trial bit from book 7. No idea why he's even there anymore, but the idea's been shelved. I blame my wanting to write a badass Dark Harry. That's why Exploding Number Four is up there, too. That one was from Order. I'm still not

saying what that last one's from. Because it just might still be canon. Ufufu. In fact, if you go back and check the other dream flashes from previous chapters (6 and 11) you might be able to put a couple of them together. I haven't put the whole on-trial bit in yet, since it's too long, but you can work out the general order of things.

So! On to business. I know the fangs-for-Snape thing has been done in a fair number of fanfics. While it may be silly of me to include a similar moment in mine, I feel my Harry isn't stupid and pigheaded enough to not see a possible way to ease up Snape's hatred towards him. And Dobby came back for a bit! While I argued with myself for awhile on whether or not to have Harry actually rescue the house elf from the Malfoys in my rewrite, I finally decided that, despite the chaos Dobby caused him, Harry's not an asshole just yet. That'll take puberty and some hard knocks. THEN he can be a jerkass all he wants.

Anyone catch on that, when Leon was talking to the Weasleys in the previous chapter, looked over his shoulder and nodded, it was because he had been over with Luna? Well, he was. And here we see the aftereffects of that moment - Luna continuing to toddle around after him. I'm not saying whether I'll have them hook up in the end, but you gotta admit, it'd be an interesting ship to sail.

I took a different direction with a few things this chapter, which means I'll have to slightly revise the final chapter. And rest assured, 18 WILL be the final chapter. Then I'll probably have to take awhile off to make an ATTEMPT at a chapter guide for Prisoner Returns. I never stick to the things, so I'd better just do them in 5-chapter bursts. That shouldn't cause me to get in any trouble I'd have to work my way out of.

And finally, aww, lookit the awkward Honks moment! Rest assured, I plan to do something amusing involving Andromeda walking in on them kissing at SOME point in the story. I'm just not sure what. I'm also not sure whether to include the first half of summer in the last chapter of this book. I think I'll refrain from it, so the next chapter might be more an epilogue to the book than anything else, since I JUST got an idea for how to start Prisoner on a different note. And now I'm gonna go off to jot it down so I don't forget!

On a post-edit note, I apologize for any random-ass typos that made it through. I'm really not feeling good tonight, which is also why this update is as LATE as it was. Meant to get it up this afternoon, but I started feeling like hell warmed over earlier. So... yeah. Formatted with only a light glancing-at. Enjoy! The end is near!

Chapter 18 – There and Back Again

The remainder of the school year passed without much fanfare.

As it turned out, Gryffindor ended up winning the House Cup. Harry didn't mind that so much, since Ravenclaw trumped everyone at Quidditch. Snape still acted the same towards Harry, though he did seem strangely absent at meals from time to time. Harry figured he was down in his office, trying to think of poisons to use on his students. Just because he tried making peace with the man didn't mean that he had to up and start liking him.

Luna Lovegood had barely left Solieyu alone, which amused both Harry and Tonks to no end. The two could often be seen walking through the halls of the school, Luna latched onto one of Solieyu's arms. Coincidentally, Solieyu spent much of his hall-walking time scowling and trying to escape Luna's clutches.

Harry ended up having a little talk with Dobby, as well. He got the house elf to promise him not to stop by Number Four that summer, which helped him relax a bit more.

"Wonder who's gonna get the Defense position next year." Harry wondered as he, Tonks, and Solieyu made their way onto the Hogwarts Express.

"Dunno." Tonks said. "I'd stay away from it if it was offered to me, though. Seems cursed."

"Yeah. Maybe we'll get lucky, though." Harry said, finding an empty compartment and slipping into it. Tonks and Solieyu followed behind him. Harry flopped down into a seat, with Tonks scooting up next to him. Solieyu stretched his legs out on the opposite site.

"I see your girlfriend couldn't make it." Tonks commented, grinning.

"She isn't my girlfriend." Solieyu stated.

Harry and Tonks exchanged an amused glance. "Sure she isn't, Leon." Tonks said. "*Suuure* she isn't."

"Oh, believe what you want." Muttered the long-haired boy. "She's got a bad case of hero worship. She'll outgrow it."

"And if she doesn't?" Harry asked.

Solieyu thought for a moment, shook his head a few times, then made a face. "I have no idea." He finally said. "I just hope she stops attaching herself to me. It's...embarrassing."

"Oh, I dunno. Having a cute girl around you all the time has its perks." Harry commented airily, glancing out the window.

"Awww..." Said Tonks, playfully punching Harry in the shoulder. "You really think I'm cute, huh?"

"Oh, now don't you two go getting all mushy on each other in front of me." Said Solieyu, swinging his legs down. "It's way too early in the trip for that and I'd rather not watch you two lovebirds snog the whole way back to King's Cross."

"Snog?" Said Harry and Tonks at the same time. Turning to look at each other, they quickly looked off, both blushing.

Solieyu slapped his forehead.

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"Alright, now remember - we wanna come over to your place at least once this summer, Leon." Tonks said as the three pushed their carts across King's Cross. "I'll send a hundred angry owls if you forget."

"I won't forget, I promise." Said Solieyu, smiling faintly. "I'll send you a letter after I ask my mother."

"Sounds like a plan. So, all I hafta do is bust Harry outta his own personal Azkaban before then, huh? Sounds easy." Tonks said, nodding sagely.

Harry, who was walking along behind the other two, rolled his eyes. "Yeah, good luck. Let's hope no random barriers pop up this time."

"Hey, I'll bring backup if I sense anything out of the ordinary." Tonks said, saluting over her shoulder.

The three made their way up to street level, where they parted ways with Solieyu, who hopped in a taxi to get home. Harry and Tonks leaned back against the nearest wall and waited for Andromeda to arrive.

"Why's she late, anyway?" Harry asked.

"Work, probably. She warned me she might be a bit late." Tonks said, shrugging. "Anyway... Look, did Dumbledore say *how* long you needed to stay at your relatives' house each year? I wanna show up the minute I can."

"Dunno... he's never said, really. And I've never really thought to ask. Just to play it safe... and I can't believe I'm saying this willingly... I'd better stay there a week." Harry said.

"A week!" Exclaimed Tonks. "Are you mad! After what they did last year!"

"No house elf to cause me to get pummelled." Harry said, tone dark. "And I don't exactly plan to let them walk all over me this year. I've got a secret weapon."

"Ooh, what is it, what is it?" Tonks asked, leaning in close.

Grinning, Harry leaned over as well. Mouth inches from one of Tonks' ears, he hissed quietly, "I've got ***THIS***...:"

Tonks squeaked, bolting upright and staring at Harry for a moment before glaring. "That isn't funny! I don't care how useful it might be, it still sounds really eerie when you do that. Especially when you do it *right* by my ear! ...And what did you say, anyway?"

Chuckling, Harry repeated what he had said in English.

"Ohh. Well, that's true. I suppose it *would* creep those stupid Muggles of yours out. Say, Harry...?" Tonks said.

"Yeah?"

"What're you gonna do about the Hogsmeade stuff?" She asked.

Frowning, Harry shrugged. "Dunno. I know that my aunt and uncle won't sign the permission slip. Anything that would allow me to have *fun*? Hardly."

"You could always explain to them that Hogsmeade is what us wizards call a torture chamber or somethin'. Y'know, for the really *bad* students to get punished in." Tonks said.

"It'd probably work on them, too." Harry said, smirking. "I might try it if I'm feeling particularly daring about it..."

"Best of luck to ya." Tonks said, patting Harry on the shoulder.

A few minutes later and a familiar car came around the corner. After Andromeda had stopped in front of them, the three quickly loaded the luggage into the vehicle, piled in it themselves, and took off again.

On the way back to Number Nine, Tonks nearly made Andromeda swerve off the road on two separate occasions as she retold her and Harry's 'adventure' that year. It seemed as if Tonks had been waiting for just the right moment to tell her mum about everything. Harry was clutching at the seat, quickly giving Tonks' mother answers when she looked around and asked him something.

"A basilisk... that's insane! Why didn't Albus do anything?" Andromeda asked, her voice a bit high-pitched. "I'm going to have a talk with that man when we get home. Honestly!"

"Ah, it turned out fine in the end." Tonks said, looking over at Harry and blushing faintly. Harry caught her glance and quickly stared at the back of the driver's side seat, also blushing.

"Even so!" Andromeda said, missing the exchange between the two. A short trip later and the three were getting out of the car again.

"*This* time..." The elder Tonks began, putting her hands on Harry's shoulders, "We won't get tricked by some barrier. Now you take care

of yourself, alright? No showing up in the same condition you showed up in *last* year, understand?"

Harry nodded. "Me and Tonks have gone over the basics. The two of you can work out how you want to break me out. Might bring along some healing potions, just in case. You never know. By the way, could you look after Hedwig? I'd rather her not get stuck there with me."

"Sure thing." Said Andromeda, taking the snowy owl's cage from Harry. "We'll take good care of her for you."

"Thanks. Be a good girl for them, alright?" Harry said, looking at his pet.

Hedwig hooted in reply, ruffling her feathers.

"Well... I guess I'm off, then." Harry said, sounding completely put-out by the thought.

Bouncing over, Tonks threw her arms around Harry, squeezing him tightly and giving him a quick peck on the cheek. "Don't worry, we'll getcha out soon enough. Just think about all the fun we'll have. ...And possibly what our new Defense professor will have wrong with him. One had a second face, the other was a lying jerk. It can't get *too* much weirder, can it?"

Blushing again, Harry shrugged. "I dunno. There's a lot of strange things out there, Tonks."

"Oh, leave Malfoy outta this." Tonks said. Upon Harry's snort, she grinned and gave him another hug. "Take care, Harry."

"You too." Harry said, hugging back with one hand. "I'll see you two in a week, okay?"

"Have fun scaring your relatives!" Tonks called as Harry made his way up the street.

"Scaring his relatives?" Andromeda asked, blinking. "What do you mean?"

Grinning even wider, Tonks looked up at her mother. "It's a long story. C'mon, let's get inside. I'm starving."

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Author's Notes: HALLELUJAH, I'M DONE!

Holy crap, I thought I'd never finish. But then I wrapped up the last few parts in like a single week. Buh. Why can't I keep to that kinda schedule?

Anyway... I know it was short, but it was meant to be. I've got some talkin' to do about the future plans, so that'll beef the length up a ways. I just wanted to wrap up a few things, set up a few others, that sorta thing.

Now! All that bein' said... I have bupkis for The Prisoner of Azkaban Returns.

Yup. Nothin'. Squat. Zilch. Zero. Nada.

So... expect a fair wait on PoA:R Chapter 1. ...Or no, actually, I lied. I do have ONE chapter planned out. But only the VERY basics. I know how I want to start it, I just dunno how I want to TAKE it.

I'm very glad I have a Weasley connection, so I can still use the old setup for Sirius' escape, though. It'll just be Fred and George who write to Harry rather than Ron.

The first truly big appearance change for our three leads is going to happen over the summer, too! And I'm not telling what it is, so nyeh!

In addition to having two of my favorite characters in the series showing up next book, I'm planning to put a little character development into Leon to flesh him out a bit more. I hope nobody minds. Given that his big secret's finally gonna be revealed, I thought it only fair to give the poor lad more screen time than he's gotten in the first two books.

I can't believe I started Chamber like... last November. Take me a long time to do something much! ...But I guess it's better this way.

Remember, I retconned SIX chapters and rewrote things a LOT. Some of you might remember that, some might not. I still have the chapters around, so maybe, after I'm done with things, I can either upload a fake book filled with outtake and rewrite chapters, put in all those bits and pieces that never make it (like the dream sequences) and stuff like that. If FFN will lemme. You know how they are.

So...yeah. I'm not sure what I'm-a do for Prisoner yet. I'd hate to say that the first chapter will be out in OCTOBER, but it may be. I need some time to think. I'd LIKE to get to Halloween BY Halloween, if you catch my drift. I've got a FEW drafts of Solieyu's speech written out, so I think I can use one o' those if I pull off the approach right.

Um... plus... um... I plan to have lots of stuff in October. My birthday's on the second of the month, see... And with Advance Wars DS and the sixth season of The Simpsons out on DVD already... and Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow coming out on the FOURTH... Well...

You guys know how I get when games hogtie my attention span.

Still! I promise the first chapter will be up before long. I'm totally taking a week off before even attempting a first-draft chapter guide. Powering out the last few chapters here's kinda burned out my circuits, if ya catch my drift.

Thank you all for reading and reviewing - it's you guys that've kept my spirits up and kept me going through times I've wanted nothing more than to stop writing entirely. And also thank you for sticking by the fic despite the sometimes horrifyingly long update gaps. You guys mean a lot to me, and I hope I can keep entertaining you with the R-Series for a long time to come.

As I seem to be averaging one book every eight or nine months... I can't help but wonder if I'll get my series finished before Rowling gets the final book out. Hmm...

Anyway... Until next book, folks, take care!